

Long-Term Ecological Reflections: Art Among Science Among Place by Charles Goodrich + Frederick J. Swanson

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Guest Editorial

The methods of the arts and sciences may differ, but creativity is fundamental to both, and creating occasions for the arts and sciences to inform one another can inspire greater insights all around. That's why we're excited about the proliferation of programs that support works at the intersection of the sciences, arts, and humanities at ecological research sites across the continent. Some offer opportunities for writers, artists, philosophers, musicians, and others from the humanities to spend time doing residencies at research sites. Other programs sponsor public events that engage scientists and artists in explorations of topics in bioregional ecology and pressing issues such as climate change.

There's a growing body of accomplished work coming out of these arts-science convergences. Some cool examples: In Arizona, several programs have led to the publishing of an ecology-informed [literary field guide to the Sonora Desert](#), while the Harvard Forest in Massachusetts produced a [book-length elegy for the eastern hemlock](#). In Alaska, public events have featured fire ecology and dance. [Wisconsin's North Temperate Lakes Long-Term Ecological Research \(LTER\)](#) program has concentrated on visual arts, inspiring paintings, posters, and quilts featuring science-inspired images and graphs.



Quilt by Bonnie Peterson, created from long-term ecological reflections at the Wisconsin North Temperate Lakes Long-Term Ecological Research site.

Photo courtesy [Bonnie Peterson](#).

When we initiated our program at the [H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest](#) in 2002, we coined the name *Long-Term Ecological Reflections* as a riff on the National Science Foundation-sponsored [Long-Term Ecological Research program](#). Inspired by earlier arts-science collaborations, now many of the 25 LTER sites and dozens of member sites of the [Organization of Biological Field Stations](#) and the [National Association of Marine Laboratories](#) sponsor Reflections-like programs, hosting artists and writers in a wide variety of creative inquiry.

And from the arts side, too, efforts to foster art-science convergences are increasing. A number of arts- and writing-rooted residency programs now encourage more scientists to participate. And many programs are making stronger efforts to introduce their artists and writers to the ecology of the local landscape.

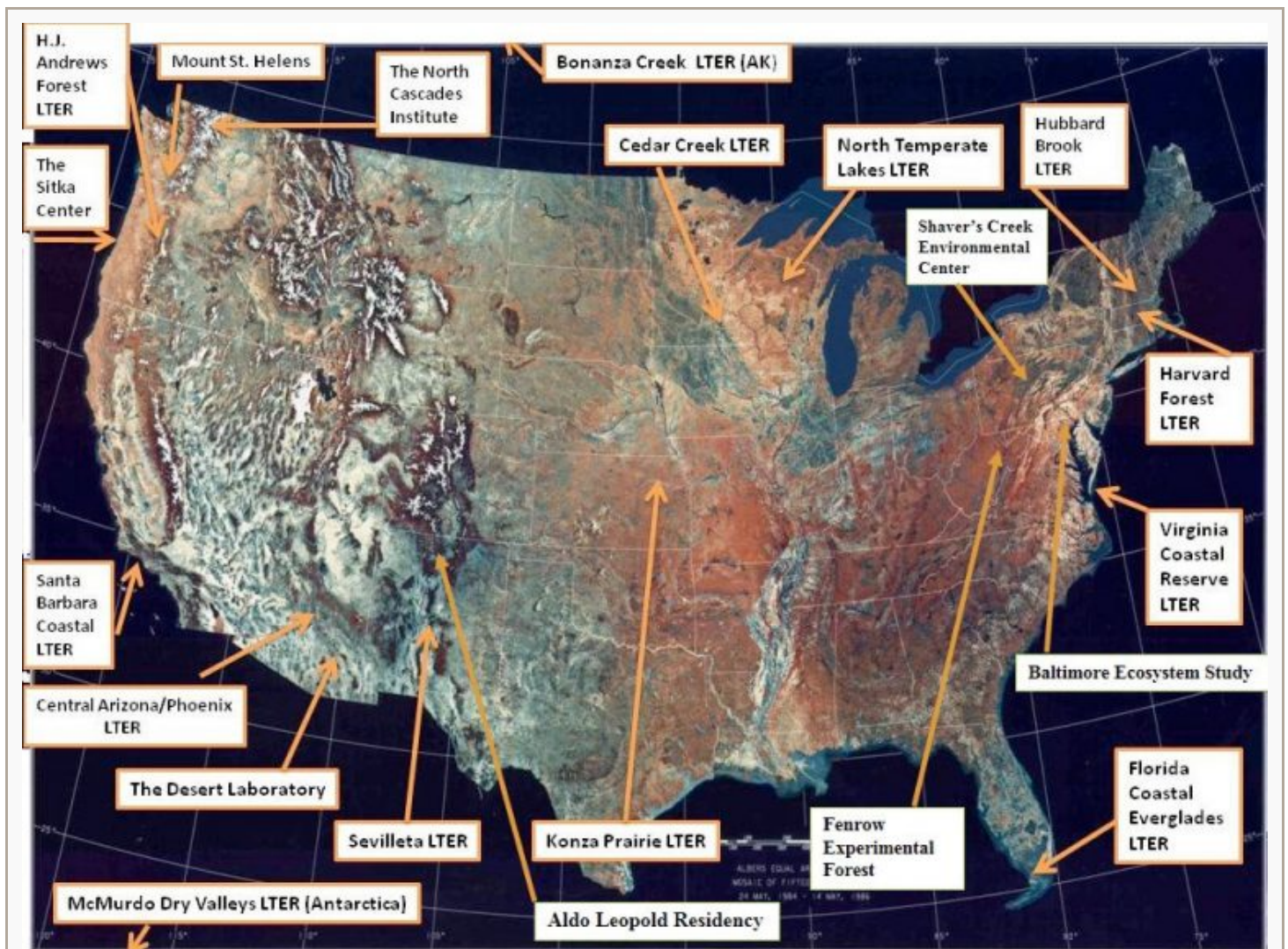
Whether their primary focus is on scientific research or artists' residencies, these places foster the excitement of sharing diverse perspectives. When scientists and creative writers pay close attention to one another's work, everyone gains insight by seeing through each others' eyes. And the land itself—the forests, grasslands, rivers, and estuaries—is often party to these inquiries, a crucial element because specific places are where current knowledge interacts with the unknowable mysteries of nature.

Many of these sites have facilities—lodging for residents, meeting rooms, labs—and extensive outdoor spaces and trails for explorations, experiments, or installation art works. The sites often have long-standing social infrastructure

in the form of interdisciplinary communities that can welcome and support diverse world views and collaborative enterprises. And these communities are deeply invested in the well-being of their home bioregions. Every successful collaboration, surprising insight, or evocative work of art or literature can be a springboard to push the edges further, to invite new and more diverse voices and an ever-widening audience.

So far, most of these programs have been created and sustained by grassroots efforts, based on the initiative of single individuals and individual sites. But they are part of a broader movement which has gained enough momentum and relevance that the [Ecological Society of America](#) solicited an [essay for its journal *Ecosphere*](#) to give an overview of art-science convergences. As that essay notes:

The growing body of works at the ecology-arts-humanities interface will be a valuable resource for future study of science-society-nature relations. These efforts potentially contribute to initiatives emerging from the ecological sciences community that seek greater connection with society—initiatives promoting sustainability and stewardship, and the practice of science citizenship, such as development of future scenario projects and regional conservation plans. . . . The strong, grassroots emergence of arts, humanities, and science collaborations at sites of long-term ecological inquiry signals a recognition that these are places of cultural as well as scientific work.



Map of research and other sites with arts-humanities involvement in North America and beyond.
Graphic courtesy [Ecological Reflections: An Archive of Art and Science Collaborative Efforts](#) .

one of the longer-running efforts. Beginning in 2002, we have now hosted over 70 writers, plus a variety of visual artists, musicians, and environmental scholars. The Andrews Reflections program is based in the Andrews' 16,000-acre watershed and 500-year-old forest, and grounded by the nearly 70 years of forest and watershed research here. It is run by the [Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word](#) at Oregon State University, and supported by private endowment funds, the [U.S. Forest Service Pacific Northwest Research Station](#), and [National Science Foundation](#).

We have an ambitious goal for Reflections: To foster inquiry and to continue gathering creative reflections for 200 years. That temporal horizon raises the issue: What can we do now to create circumstances that will sustain the project? Individuals and enlightened institutions are recognizing the importance of long-term inquiry in both the sciences and the arts and committing more resources to broadening the effort. Taking the long view is simply a cultural necessity, fruitful in its own right, though its outcomes may be “pre-relevant.” Greater institutional support should be loudly encouraged (and we think Reflections is a terrific candidate for support by a private endowment!). But there is never any guarantee of funding, for the arts or the sciences. What we must do is continue cultivating a robust community of interest, continue growing the network of art-science advocates and practitioners who believe in this prescient, intersectional work.

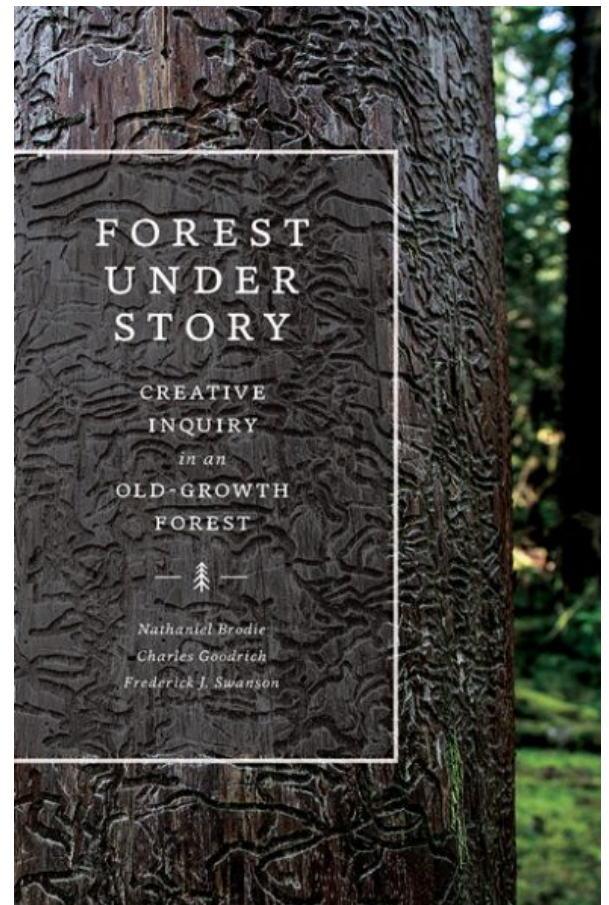
Here's another critical question in interdisciplinary undertakings: What works? What counts as an effective form of expression? Our new book—[Forest Under Story: Creative Inquiry in an Old-Growth Forest](#)—is an attempt to express collaborative discovery via the shared experience of a research forest. *Forest Under Story* serves as a first-decade report from the Ecological Reflections 200-year inquiry. (Stay tuned for the next 19 decadal installments.) The bridging of art and science in this book is reflected by the co-editorship of a prose writer, a poet, and a scientist; by their joint authorship of the short Ground Works essays that provide context for the contributing writers' works; and by the contributions of several writers who are fully credentialed in both writing and science worlds. The result, we hope, is a whole humanities-arts-science view of a forest and watershed.

With *Forest Under Story*, and with all the emerging Reflections-like programs, we celebrate the accomplishments of a community which shares a sense of kinship with place and a deep understanding of the value of taking the long view.

Charles Goodrich is the author of three books of poetry and a collection of essays, and co-edited two anthologies, [Forest Under Story: Creative Inquiry in an Old-Growth Forest](#) and [In the Blast Zone: Catastrophe and Renewal on Mount St. Helens](#). He serves as director for the [Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word](#) at Oregon State University.

Although retired as a U.S. Forest Service research geologist, **Frederick J. Swanson** remains active as a Senior Fellow of the [Spring Creek Project](#) and in fostering arts/humanities engagements with sites of long-term ecological inquiry.

Header photo of old-growth tree with shoes by HiroArts, courtesy [Pixabay](#). Photo of Charles



Goodrich courtesy Charles Goodrich. Photo of Frederick J. Swanson courtesy Frederick J. Swanson.

