

Writing + Art at Andrews Forest, Oregon

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CurrentsLong-Term Ecological Reflections · 15 min read May 5, 2021

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Long-Term Ecological Reflections

Andrews Forest at a Glance

Location: The western Cascade Range of Oregon, near the town of Blue River

Year arts activities began: 2002

Writers and artists hosted: 104 writers, artists, musicians, and scholars have been in residence or have visited the Andrews Forest. Learn about them in the [*Forest Log*](#)

Highlighted works: Visit these selected works from past writers-in-residence at the Andrews Forest:

- [The Long Haul](#) by Robert Michael Pyle
- [Interview with a Watershed](#) by Robin Wall Kimmerer
- [return of the dead log people](#) by Jerry Martien

- [Connecting the Dots](#) by Elizabeth Rush (a chapter from her book *Rising*, a 2019 Pulitzer finalist in nonfiction)

How to apply: The Spring Creek Project accepts applications for the Andrews Forest Writing Residency twice a year, following May 1 and December 1 deadlines. Applicants submit a letter of interest as well as a work sample. [Learn more.](#)

In 2002, two forest researchers walked across the Oregon State University parking lot on their way to lunch, musing about what was missing from the watershed and forest restoration movement. It's not that they lacked good science or technology or data. What they needed, they said, were new *metaphors*.

That realization led them to the office door of [Kathleen Dean Moore](#), then a philosophy professor at Oregon State University and director of the [Spring Creek Project](#), an organization that hosts programming and events connecting writing, arts, and humanities with nature and ecology. This seed of an idea—that new metaphors, new stories, and new ways of talking and thinking about the environment could make a marked difference in conservation efforts—led a group of initial organizers to join forces and hold “New Metaphors of Restoration of Forests and Watersheds,” a three-day event that brought 16 writers and scientists together to share readings, ideas, and music exploring how to reframe our relationship with the land.

They honed in on the need for “re-story-ation”—that is, finding the stories that give direction and meaning to the work of restoring damaged and altered landscapes. And to find those stories, a key would be to engage storytellers by nurturing strong collaborations among the sciences, humanities, and arts.

That initial event was the start of a partnership between the Spring Creek Project and the [H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest](#) Long-Term Ecological Research (LTER) program, also affiliated with Oregon State University. In the past two decades, this partnership has brought more than 100 writers, artists, visiting scholars, and musicians to the Andrews Forest to continue the work of using creative responses to understand our place in the world and the environmental challenges we face.

They named the overarching program Long-Term Ecological *Reflections*—a riff on [Long-Term Ecological Research](#), the name of the network the Andrews Forest is a part of along with 27 other large ecological research sites funded by the National Science Foundation.

A New Kind of Data Collection

The H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest was established in 1948 by the U.S. Forest Service and has become one of the most studied forest ecosystems in the world. The site joined the LTER network in 1980, as part of the first cohort of sites. Its 15,800 acres, the watershed of Lookout Creek, includes mountain ridges over 5,000 feet in elevation, deep valleys, fast-

flowing streams, and many old-growth stands, with some trees exceeding 500 years old. A rich and varied body of science and data have emerged on streamflow, water quality, vegetation succession, forest management, climate change, and other research topics, with some studies ongoing for decades.



Writers walk through an old-growth stand in the Andrews Forest.
Photo by Carly Lettero.

When organizers first began inviting writers to the forest, they wondered what would happen if they gave writers the chance to do this kind of place-based engagement over the course of several decades. This intriguing question ultimately led them to the audacious decision to

establish Long-Term Ecological Reflections as a 200-year program collecting creative responses to the forest. This timeline mirrors a hallmark 200-year log decomposition experiment at Andrews Forest (the lifetime of a rotten log for some faster-decomposing tree species), now 36 years underway.

Fred Swanson, a retired forest researcher and senior fellow at the Spring Creek Project who has been nurturing the Reflections program since the beginning, sees the program as another kind of data collection.

“We are collecting cultural data on human perception and reaction to these ecosystems,” he says. And just as the scientific data will span decades and even centuries into the future to create a more complex and complete picture of how a place operates and changes over time, so too will the journal entries, essays, poems, and art create a living, growing record of how we understand the forest and the relation of people to the forest. Organizers collect all of these creative responses in an online catalogue called the Forest Log.



The forest floor of the Andrews has seen many journals and notebooks, as residents spend time hiking, exploring, reflecting, and writing.

Photo by Carly Lettero.

Because the Andrews headquarters has ample space for overnight guests, a residency program made perfect sense, with visitors generally staying one to two weeks in the forest. In those early years of the program, Kathleen Dean Moore used her engagement with the

Orion Society to invite renowned environmental writers, including Robert Michael Pyle and Robin Wall Kimmerer, as the first writers-in-residence at the Andrews. As these luminaries populated the first entries of the *Forest Log*, interest in the program grew.

Alison Hawthorne Deming, also one of the early residents, said she wanted to be a part of a program that challenges us to take a longer view of the impacts of human civilization, and that the setup of the program appealed to her, too. “There is something very freeing about considering that what I might write today to document my experience of the forest did not need to be definitive,” she says. “I was simply laying down one more layer of organic material to add to a long process of inter-relationship in the forest ecology.”



Gatherings of small groups of thinkers at Andrews Forest have addressed topics such as new metaphors for restoration and catastrophe and renewal. The ancient forest landscape catalyzes conversations among writers, artists, and scientists.

Photo by Michael Furniss.

In the grand scheme of the program, it's in its “early” years, even at two decades strong. In many senses, the cultural data collection underway has pre-relevance—that is, insights gained from the data may not become clear for decades to come. Scientists have seen this same dynamic play out in their research. For instance, study of the northern spotted owl had been ongoing at the Andrews for years, relatively out of view, until suddenly it became hyper-relevant in the early 1990s as negotiations raged between conservationists, the government, and the timber industry.

Common Ground

Taking a cue from research plots—places scientists visit again and again to collect data—organizers established three “Reflections Plots” and invited resident writers to visit them during their stays. The idea was that this common ground of experience could help reveal how perceptions and stories shift over time.

The sites include a gravel bar at Lookout Creek, a recent clear-cut, and the 200-year log decomposition experiment site, which has turned out to be a favorite spot for residents.



This log decomposition site—home to a 200-year research experiment on the life of rotting trees—is one of three “Reflections Plots” residents are invited to visit during their time in Andrews Forest.

Photo by Tom Iraci.

Robert Michael Pyle, the inaugural resident, says he was especially entranced by the log decomposition site, and loved that he could wander at will, being surprised at every turn. “I am attracted to ongoing, long-run undertakings with fidelity to place,” he says. “Such an approach enables one to place one’s own modest contribution and unique perceptions in the context of a great chain and community of observers who have gone before. It’s been fun and stimulating to see and read the many residents who have followed me.”

While writers often visit the Reflections Plots and other areas of the forest solo, giving them time to observe, reflect, and take field notes at their own pace, sometimes they accompany scientists into the field as they collect data and work on research projects.

Arts and Music Enter the Scene

During the first several years of the program, writers completing residencies at the Andrews did so through the Blue River Fellowship, which is awarded to established writers by invitation, and the Andrews Forest Writing Residency, which is awarded twice a year by application. But the program naturally expanded over time in scope and vision, and now several visual artists and a handful of musicians have completed residencies at the forest, adding their unique perspective and creative responses to the mix.



It rained for 11 days of artist Claire Giordano’s two-week residency at the Andrews. She let the falling rain be a co-creator in several of her paintings, including in this series called “The Space Between” in which the raindrops pattern the skies.

Some artists have established long-term engagement with the Andrews, including local visual artist [Leah Wilson](#). Her 2012 residency at the Andrews introduced her to ecologists working on long-term studies in the forest. Attracted by the long-term nature of their inquiry, she now considers herself an episodic lifetime artist-in-residence and has created a body of work that melds science and art, often involving field visits, data, and repeat sample collection.

Her latest series, *[Listening to the Forest](#)*, was recently installed as a permanent exhibit in the newly constructed Peavy Forest Science Center on Oregon State University’s campus. The pieces are based on the distinctions of the cellular structure of different wood species and the variances of light quality from forest canopy to forest floor. In the early stages of the project, she gathered wood samples and created image slides to view the cellular structure of the samples, talking along the way with scientists about the work.

“Scientists have opened my ways of seeing and shaped what it is that I am able to see and notice,” says Wilson. “My work evolves with more complexity and sophistication as my knowledge of the place and forest grows because of working with scientists.”



Leah Wilson’s *Listening to the Forest* is a public art project on permanent display in the Peavy Forest Science Center on Oregon State University’s campus. The large, laser-cut panels in the exhibit depict magnified cellular structures of common tree species in the Andrews Forest: red alder, western hemlock, Pacific yew, and Douglas-fir.

Photo by Leah Wilson.

Musicians have brought new kinds of stories to the *Forest Log* as well. [Lisa Schonberg](#), a percussionist and sound artist, completed a residency in 2018. Schonberg uses highly sensitive recording equipment to capture sounds in a natural environment that she incorporates into her dynamic compositions. She was inspired by one of Leah Wilson’s paintings, “Ambient,” on display at Andrews headquarters. By capturing multiple images in the same spot throughout a day, Wilson had examined and represented the great range of light and color in Lookout Creek. Schonberg was drawn to the process of looking at one physical space and taking readings of the myriad sonic textures and pitches that can occur. By placing a hydrophone on a rock at the stream bottom, she took a ten-second recording every two minutes, extracting and looping elements to create her piece “Eighth Notes.”



Hip hop artist Paul Miller, a.k.a. DJ Spooky, created his symphony *Heart of a Forest* based on his seasonal visits to the Andrews Forest.

Photo by Darryl Lai.

Hip hop artist Paul Miller—a.k.a. DJ Spooky—created his symphony *Heart of a Forest* after four visits to Andrews Forest in different seasons in 2015. For this work, Miller says he wanted to reimagine how we think about traditional forms of music, explore the interconnections of nature, and make an “acoustic portrait” of this place. The Oregon State University Wind Ensemble debuted the symphony in 2016, and then Miller toured a multimedia performance based on *Heart of a Forest* across the state of Oregon.

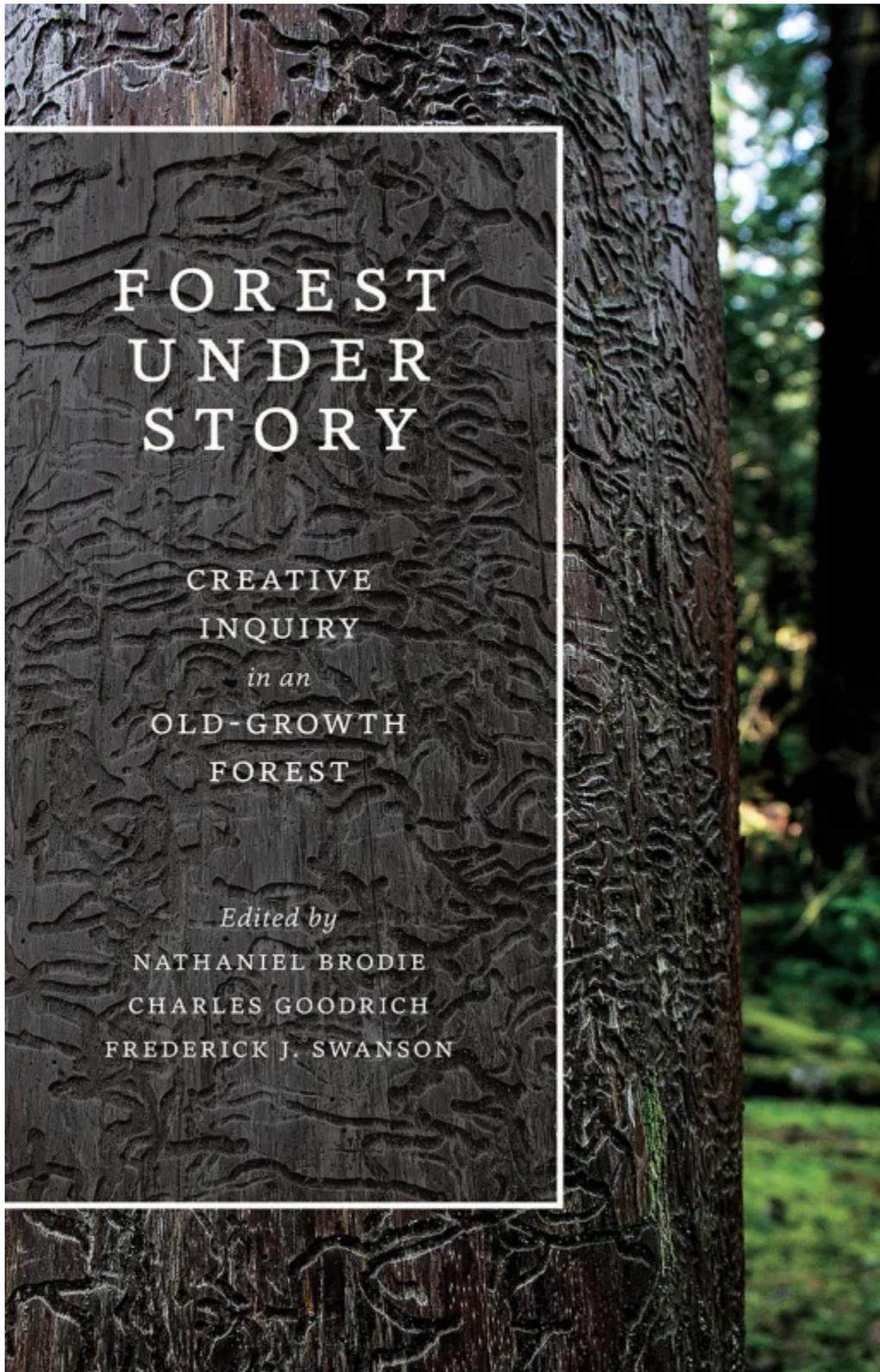


Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/3qgdFsEsHOQ>

Public Outreach

Since the Reflections program kicked off nearly two decades ago, the local community and public at large have been able to engage with the works in a number of ways, from pop-up exhibits in downtown galleries to performances and published written works. All the writings, as well as the visual art pieces and sound works, produced through residencies and visits to the forest are catalogued online and available for anyone to read in the *Forest Log*. The *Log* includes a bio and photo of the 104 residents and visitors to date, as well as a collection of hundreds of creative responses to the forest, from essays, poems, and book chapters to field notes, paintings, and musical recordings.

The 2016 book *Forest Under Story: Creative Inquiry in an Old-Growth Forest* includes a selection of works from the first ten years of the Reflections program. Swanson half jokes that, with the goal of offering a report in book form every decade of the program, we can keep our eye out for the next 19 installments.



Published in 2016, *Forest Under Story* is a collection of residents' writings from the first decade of the Long-Term Ecological Reflections program.

Some written works have taken on an impressive life of their own, with many now published in prominent journals and magazines, such as *Orion*, *National Geographic*, *Terrain.org*, *Kestrel*, and *Commonweal*, and others included in books. A chapter in Elizabeth Rush's book

Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore details her experience tracking spotted owls with scientists during her 2016 residency. *Rising* was a finalist for the 2019 Pulitzer Prize in Nonfiction. Gretel Van Wieren's 2015 residency resulted in her book *Listening at Lookout Creek: Nature in Spiritual Practice*.

Another part of outreach for Andrews organizers has been sharing their vision and expertise with the larger community of research sites within the LTER network. By providing support and advice, such as hosting workshops about arts and humanities programs at long-term ecological research sites and helping write proposals, they've helped other sites get their own programs off the ground. The program at the Andrews now serves as somewhat of a central hub for a larger Reflections network that includes about 20 sites.

Taken together, the creative works that have emerged from Reflections build a sense of reverence about this ancient forest. The kaleidoscope of responses, varied in form and tone, offer a picture of why this place is important and of what would be lost without it.



Photographer David Paul Bayles used a “painting with light” technique to create his 2018 series on the Andrews Forest. This work was presented at a public exhibit in downtown Corvallis, Oregon, and profiled in *Terrain.org*'s ARTerrain gallery as “Outside of Time | Forest Landscapes.” Images from the series have also been featured on the covers of four magazines in the past year.

“Awe and wonder can be powerful motivations in the practice of conservation,” says Swanson. “And the more people feel those emotions, the less likely they are to want old forests damaged or lost. We shouldn't have to rely on good science alone to say, ‘We

shouldn't cut down this 500-year-old being.' It's a matter of values, not just facts."

The Long Game

An overarching goal for everyone involved in Reflections has been to keep it free-flowing and let the program evolve organically. "We've never laid out a roadmap," says Swanson. "We've been able to stay flexible. And the positive outcomes have been totally amazing."

Without being tied to a specific structure or outcome, the program can respond nimbly to new challenges. For the first time in 20 years, there will be a gap in entries in the *Forest Log*, as the Andrews closed in 2020 first because of COVID-19 and then because of the worst wildfires in Oregon history, which burned into the southwest watersheds of the forest.

When it is safe to gather in person, writers and artists will return. Spring Creek Project already has plans in mind for programming around fire, imagining how to bring residents and scientists together to process these changes to the landscape. A hundred years from now, the *Forest Log* will contribute data points showing how we were trying to make sense of a dramatically changing world.



Oregon's Holiday Farm Fire in fall 2020 destroyed the nearby town of Blue River and burned into the lower watersheds of the Andrews Forest. All staff made it out of the emergency evacuation safely and the headquarters buildings that house residents were spared.

Photo by Mark Schultz.

In looking back on her experience with the program, Elizabeth Rush says it's exceptional in the way that it asks how human perceptions of the more-than-human world shift over time and how we might track those shifts through creative inquiry. "Of course we know that the forest will evolve and change over 200 years, but also how we understand ourselves in

relationship to that space, what it awakens in our hearts and minds, this too will evolve,” she says. “And it seems to me to be of deep spiritual importance to try to mark those shifts. I know of no other program quite like it.”

When Swanson reflects on everything that has happened with the program since 2002, he admits it’s hard to capture what it all means. That’s because, in part, that meaning is still unfolding. “This work is important for reasons that I won’t live to know,” he says.

A growing network of long-term ecological research sites in the United States (and beyond) features collaborations among the sciences, arts, and humanities. From the hardwood forests of New England to the towering old growth trees of the Pacific Northwest, we will introduce you to a handful of these diverse places and explore what happens when environmental scientists and artists hike, live, research, and create together with the long view of decades and centuries in mind.

***Terrain.org* is pleased to partner with the Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word on this series.** Spring Creek Project hosts a Long-Term Ecological Reflections program in Oregon that is designed to last 200 years and is one of many organizations nurturing this loose-knit network of creative inquiry. Learn more at [Ecological Reflections](#).



Shelley Stonebrook is the program coordinator for the Spring Creek Project. She manages the organization’s residency programs and helps plan events and other programming that support artists and writers and that cultivate connections across many disciplines. She holds

an MA in English from the University of Kansas and was previously a senior editor at *Mother Earth News* magazine. She lives and gardens with her husband and daughter in Corvallis, Oregon.

Header photo of Lookout Creek by Tom Iraci.

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