

For Release:
Publication Date: May 16, 2023
yalebooks.com

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These Trees Tell a Story *The Art of Reading Landscapes*

By Noah Charney

**A master class on how to read a natural landscape and
unravel the clues to its unique ecological history**

“A book for the shelf of any forest wanderer—and a book to take on those wanderers,
so you can much better understand what you’re seeing!”
—**Bill McKibben, author of *Wandering Home***

Framed by a series of interactive field walks through ten New England ecosystems, *These Trees Tell a Story: The Art of Reading Landscapes* (May 16, 2023 publication), invites readers to see the world through the eyes of a trained naturalist.

Author **Noah Charney** ties together geology, forest ecology, wildlife biology, soil processes, evolution, conservation, and more, showing how and why landscapes appear in their current forms. With guided questions, immersive photography, and a narrative approach, Charney reveals the landscapes’ respective complexities, uncovering millions of years of forces at play.

Noah Charney can discuss:

- How approaches and decisions on managing your own yard can have ripple effects through an ecosystem
- What the shape of the land can tell you
- How pathogens and chemicals may have altered your landscape
- What can be gleaned from the origins of rocks and soils at a location
- What environmental variables, such as elevation, moisture, temperature, convey about your landscape

- Wetlands: how they form at a site, what species depend on them, and more
- What can be learned from the geologic history of a site
- How to orient yourself on a map and think about the topographic settings of the site

Charney's writing provides aspiring citizen scientists, as well as naturalists, urban ecologists, and those who simply love the outdoors, with the necessary investigative skills to look at a landscape, interpret it, and tell its story—from its start as rock or soil to the plants and animals that live on it.

Ultimately, Charney argues, by critically engaging with the landscape we will become better at connecting with nature and ourselves.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Noah Charney is assistant professor of conservation biology at the University of Maine and coauthor of the award-winning *Tracks and Sign of Insects and Other Invertebrates: A Guide to North American Species*. He has been interviewed in outlets including *The Boston Globe*, *The Washington Post*, *The Tennessean*, Nashville Public Radio, and more. For more on the book, including available images for media use and book trailers, visit the website <https://www.treestellastory.com>. Noah Charney lives in Orono, ME.

Q&A with Noah Charney, author of *These Trees Tell a Story*

Your book is based on a college course you taught called “Field Naturalist,” in which you took students into outdoors to decipher and decode the mysteries in the surroundings. Does the reader of your book need to be a specialist or trained student to work with *These Trees Tell a Story*?

The book speaks to folks at many different levels, from non-scientists to deeply trained ecologists, and students who took my course ranged from beginners to advanced naturalists. As a non-scientist you may be drawn in by the anecdotes and narratives and come away with a deeper understanding of the natural world. As a professional ecologist or naturalist, you might spend more time trying to solve the central mysteries of each chapter, and you should walk away with a broader appreciation for ecological layers that are outside of your area of focus.

For the beginning landscape detective: Are there a few essential items you'd suggest naturalists take for their investigations?

An open mind. Being a landscape detective is all about slowing down and taking the time needed to find the mysteries. After you find the questions, each answer will be discipline-specific, and depending on where you live, I might start with the list of general field guides and

texts in the syllabus on the book's supplemental website or in the beginning of the bibliography in the back of the book.

You've spent time in areas as including Nashville, Phoenix, Tucson, Boston, and areas in Vermont and Maine among other areas. Are there landscapes that you'd suggest to someone just starting to hone their landscape-reading skills?

Forests are often an easier place to start, as you can see the layering of the species, the dominant species are relatively easy to identify, and forests typically have a history of cutting and other major disturbances that are readily discovered.

What about setting a mindset as people head outdoors: anything you can suggest for them there? Any preconceptions to fight, and new ways to look at things?

I think the main lessons for folks to learn are that nature is not static, and nor is it random. For the most part, the plants and trees you see in the forest in front of you are not the same as they were in the recent past and will not be the same in the near future. They are responding to past disturbances caused by people and nature, and the species are all in a great dance with each other. And in this dance, each species has a particular place and time on the stage where she appears. That might be obvious, but I think is often overlooked – there is a predictability in where and when you find species on the landscape.

You talk about “disturbance dynamics” can you explain what these are and how naturalists can detect them?

In any ecosystem, whether forest, field, or wetland, external forces can drive changes. Imagine a hurricane, fire, or dam-making beaver sweeping into a forest and upending the environment. Different ecosystems are prone to different sorts of disturbances that might occur at different frequencies. It depends on where you are and what's out there on the landscape. The rhythm of disturbances over time creates predictable patterns in the landscape. These in turn determine what species can survive, and you can learn to see and understand these patterns.

Can people living in suburban and urban environments, with manicured and mowed down environments, still find stories in their landscapes? If so, any tips for them?

Yes, absolutely. The first chapter of the book is focused on urban environments, and there is a lot going on in those settings. My friend Charley has a favorite abandoned parking lot in Burlington that has been slowly undergoing succession over the past few decades. You might look at the trees and plants surrounding a bike path and realize that there used to be a wetland there. Or you might look at the urban finches and see that they are evolving on a separate trajectory than the rural finches and now look and sound different.

And lastly: what is it you hope that your book provides to people?

I hope it helps people to rediscover the sacred in nature, to find meaning and connection, and to enjoy the experience of engaging with the natural world. Beneath that, I hope to teach some of the broad concepts in environmental science and ecology that shape our world.

ADVANCE PRAISE:

“A delightful immersion in close observation and deep understanding.”—Tristan Gooley, author of *The Lost Art of Reading Nature’s Signs* and *The Natural Navigator*

“A book for the shelf of any forest wanderer—and a book to take on those wanderers, so you can much better understand what you’re seeing!”—Bill McKibben, author of *Wandering Home*

“Charney inspires readers to rediscover a sense of wonder in their local landscapes, from soil to slopes to stone walls to salamanders. Become a nature detective by reading this insightful book!”—Meg Lowman, author of *Life in the Treetops* and *The Arbornaut*

“Unfolding as a series of puzzles or mysteries in the landscape, this book is a thought-provoking, vivid, and creative guide to asking the right questions and being in the moment in the outdoors.”—James Barilla, author of *My Backyard Jungle*

“This very engaging book is a series of natural history mysteries and a naturalist’s memoir. Highly recommended!”—Tom Wessels, author of *Reading the Forested Landscape: A Natural History of New England*

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Price: \$30.00 * Paperback ISBN 9780300230895* 432 Pages

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