

What Makes a Forest? By Joycelyn Longdon

As the human world was forced into premature hibernation a few days shy of the beginning of spring, the natural world was poised for the coming seasons of abundance. In those months that followed, Grizedale Forest continued to grow, wildlife flourished, and across the world minds were overwhelmed by a reimagining of the value of nature, of escaping outdoors and of the freedom to wander and roam.

Nature is Ours: Forest of Cultures responds to these growing feelings, centering the narratives of voices least represented in the UK's natural environments and green spaces.

When contemplating the now trite concept of diversity in nature, my mind turns to exploring what makes Grizedale a forest, the events it has lived through and the forms it has taken. Its name is derived from that which was given to the valley in the 9th Century, when Furness and its Fells were colonised by Norse invaders. Since then, it has been stewarded by monks of Furness abbey and provided key materials for, and in turn partly destroyed by, local industries such as charcoal baking, iron smelting* and even bobbin** making. The forest that now stands is a descendent of a woodland family of primeval oak, birch, holly and alder and by 1537, it was found mainly to consist of coppice, having been felled over the years for industry***.

In the environmental historian Jessica J Lee's 2019 memoir on memory, migration and Taiwan, we witness the graceful way in which the Chinese character for 'wood' or 'tree', 木, is multiplied to create the word 'forest': 森林 (senlin, 'forest'). Today, you'll find Grizedale inhabited mainly by Sitka Spruce. Introduced to Britain in 1831, Sitka Spruce originates from the west coast of North America and is named after the town of Sitka, Alaska. Sitka, a conifer, is considered one of the most important tree species in Britain today, accounting for 50% of British commercial plantations.

An immigrant,
from the shores of the pacific.
Hardy, useful, now prolific.

In strength and height,
in width and might,
its forest siblings pale.

If two trees make a forest,
then Sitka makes Grizedale.

Uprooted, displaced, rehomed; the story of the Sitka Spruce. A long way from home, integrating into a new community, called upon for its resilience and industriousness: becoming the backbone of a nation. The young used for paper, the old for ships – a vessel for words and journeys alike.

Together,
Sitka,
Larch,
Pine,
and Fir commune,
and beneath their shade,
we follow suit.

The British writer Robert McFarlane in 'The Old Ways' recounts the words of Adam Nicholson speaking of the Shiant Islands in Scotland. "The Shiants [are the]...organising nodes in a web of connections, both human and natural". Forests are islands in themselves, surrounded not by water but by land. In forests, we stand as islands, surrounded by life. We are the nodes, and the forest connects us.

Uprooted, displaced, rehomed; the story of immigrant families. From Ghana, Jamaica, Syria and Spain, some came for prosperity, some came to escape. Doctors, nurses, lawyers, cleaners. A long way from home, integrating into a new community, called upon for their resilience and industriousness: becoming the backbone of a nation. As we look upon Grizedale, we look in the mirror.

Assumptions are our windows to the world; without wiping them clean every now and then, we are wont**** to distort the view. A shared love for nature is common to us all, yet the dominant narrative continues to insist that communities of

colour don't like the outdoors. For many immigrant families, nature acts as one of the only tethers to their previous life and heritage or a welcome solace from a changed environment.

Faten, a NIOFOC participant, explained how she and her family would spend time in nature every Friday in order to “increase family bonding” and “teach [them] to help each other”. “We take food and we all share the preparation of it by the father, mother, and even the children, and then we play a family game like throwing the ball or hiding”. For Faten “sitting in nature improves the psyche”.

Ilona, a participant in the NIOFOC project, recounts experiencing disturbing nightmares after moving to the UK and stumbling across the legend of the dreamcatcher in her quest to make them stop. She decided to “do some research of [her] own to see how [she] could stop these nightmares or at least tame them down...that was when [she] stumbled upon the legend of the dreamcatcher”. In her piece which you can find on the site, she describes how “all parts of the authentic dreamcatcher have a meaning connected to the natural world. The shape of the dreamcatcher is a circle because it represents the circle of life and how forces like the sun and the moon travel each day and night across the sky”.

These stories, like many of those of families and individuals across Britain, are unique. Yet the thread that binds all our experiences together is nature itself.

*“Within the folds of thick forest
Beneath the branches where birds and bees nest
[Let's] share together nature's delight
With woodland cover and sunlight*

- Adapted from *The Fern Ticket* by journalist, academic, and emerging nature writer Zakiya McKenzie

In the face of war and violence, rising seas and increasing pollution, inequality and injustice, confinement and restriction, the forest acts as an oasis of connection and mutuality. A reservoir of collective psychic energy.

The Forest is in Grizedale, but it is also in our hearts and in our minds. Explore the site to find activities suggested by the NIOFOC group and feel the benefits of nature from your own home.

Notes

*Smelting - the extraction of metal from its ore by a process involving heating and melting.

**Bobbin - a cylinder or cone holding thread, yarn, or wire, used especially in weaving and machine sewing.

*** Coppicing is a forest and woodland management technique. It involves felling (cutting down a tree) at its base and allowing it to regrow. This not only provides a sustainable supply of timber, but it has biodiversity benefits; allowing more light to reach the ground, encouraging other species to grow there and in turn provide food sources for butterflies, insects and consequently birds, bats and mammals. Read more on the [National Trust](#) website.

****Wont - In the habit of or accustomed to doing something