BEYOND TREELINE

words :: Lisa Richardson
photos :: Garrett Grove

The morning after I watched Jordan Manley's latest film, *Treeline: A Story Written in Rings*, instead of power-walking home from the school bus-stop, head down, straight back to my desk, I took a detour, cutting into a small patch of trees.

It was a group of Douglas-fir—the grandfather tree, *Srap7ul*, in Ucwalmictws, the language of the Lil'wat Nation, meaning "something standing upright." The trees formed a rough circle, so I inserted myself into the arc and stood there for a few minutes, thinking about the things these beings give the world that I wanted to express appreciation for—to formally acknowledge.

Inciting crazy tree-talkers likely wasn't what Manley had in mind when he set out to make a film about tree-skiing for Patagonia in December 2017. Then again, he did want to provoke action.

"Yes," admits Manley, "I did have an activist agenda. Absolutely."

It's an unexpected confession for a film that feels more like a meditation than a tirade. But then, Manley has always stood out in the adrenalized action sport niche for his thoughtfully composed approach.

The film began, originally, as a seed for a ski-magazine feature. While he was working predominantly as an editorial photographer, Manley shared the idea of shooting a story about different global tree-skiing locations with fellow tree-skiing enthusiast, Leah Evans. "It eventually floated out of my mind," he recalls, "but Leah held on to it."

When Evans later became a Patagonia athlete, she pitched the idea to the company, attaching Manley's name to it. Seven years after it had been released into the air like tree pollen, it drifted down into his lap.

In the intervening span he had travelled the world, making award-winning short films such as *The Curve of Time* and the landmark *A Skier's Journey* series for Arc'teryx. He'd also suffered a serious concussion, and as part of his healing process spent two years wandering the environs of his Vancouver North Shore home, seeking out the immense trees that had somehow escaped being logged in a 150 year-long gorge-fest that chewed through the native forests in this part of the world, trees that the late Randy Stoltmann first honoured 30-years prior in his *Hiking Guide to the Big Trees of Southwestern British Columbia*.

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Thrilled by his finds, this same tree-hunting ethos infused Manley's filming of *Treeline*, which unfolded like a kind a global casting call: a quest to find some of the most arresting trees on the planet—the towering red cedars and hemlock of western Canada, America's ancient bristlecone and limber pines, and the birch, cypress and montane beech of Japan. Trees that have something important to share—if only we could slow down enough to listen.

Yuki Miyazaki, who grew up in Japan but was educated in the United States, was the film's onsite producer in Japan, where he now runs a boutique powder-guiding business on the northern island of Hokkaido. Used to chasing powder for clients, he found this wasn't Manley and photographer Garrett Grove's pre-eminent concern. "We travelled around central Hokkaido to meet different trees," Miyazaki relates. "It felt more like we were going to visit somebody."

Deeply inspired since childhood by the cult Japanese animated film *My Neighbour Totoro*, in which two girls interact with friendly wood spirits and magical trees, Manley was drawn to Japan less for the celebrated tree-skiing than to probe a spiritual counterpoint to scientific inquiry—the animist beliefs infused throughout *Totoro* of a natural world that is fully, spiritually alive, along with the Shinto practice of trees being enshrined and prayed to as gods. In *Treeline*, this thinking is unpacked in conversations with tree doctor Konami Tsukamoto and Shinto priest Akihiko Tamaki.

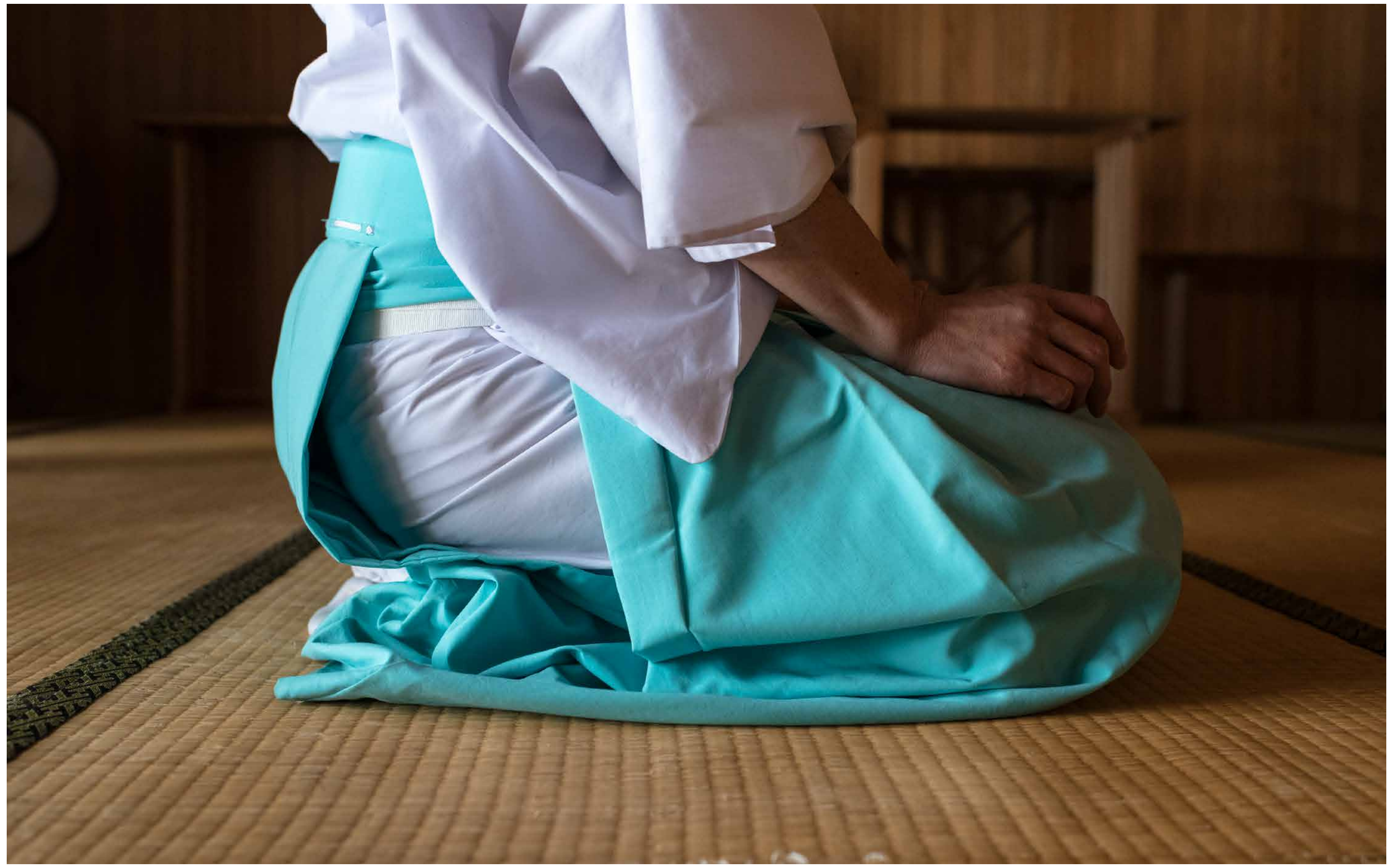
For the film's British Columbia segments, Evans spent hours breaking trail and bushwhacking around Revelstoke and Nelson with a gear-laden Grove and Manley. Instead of just blasting into the alpine as she normally would on a ski-film shoot, they explored the lower forested elevations where she found herself feeling unusually protected. "Those big trees have been there for a long time, so you know they haven't been in an avalanche path, that they haven't been damaged. It felt safe."

The experience seeded a growing sense of obligation to return the favour—to protect the trees.

Thanks to the research of scientists like University of British Columbia ecologist Dr. Suzanne Simard, much of what we're now coming to understand about forests is reconfiguring our appreciation for their rich complexity. While we're distracted by the height of a forest's tallest trees, by assessing their trunk-widths for the board feet of lumber they might yield, or by skiing through the spaces between them, the forest's real majesty is invisibly working beneath our feet, communicating and organizing itself through an underground network of roots, fungi, chemical signals and energy transfers.

Echoing the animistic and Shintoist perspectives of her castmates, the scientist asserts that trees are not inanimate. In fact, the forest, as a system, is deeply intelligent. In the film, Simard says, "Intelligence is a word we ascribe to humans and animals, and tend to associate with nervous systems and brains. Plants don't have nervous systems or brains like we do, with neurons and axons, but when we dissect the mycorrhizal network mathematically, it's the same pattern as [an animal's] neural network, evolved for efficiency of communication—kind of like a brain. When we look at the actual compounds moving through this network, some of them are exactly the same as neurotransmitters in our brains."

Plants perceive, receive information, make decisions, have memories, learn: she makes the case for our kinship with forests, with



arguments designed for the head-mind but which land deeply in heart-mind, triggering an ancient recognition. Once groundbreaking but now widely reinforced, Simard's research has helped establish that trees indeed communicate with each other. The next line of inquiry would be to ask: what might they communicate to *us*?

"It's kind of a fraught topic," acknowledges Simard. "From the point of view of western science, we interact with the world, but things like the forest don't interact with us."

While this may be the received view, a whole realm of socio-logical and psychological research has sprouted in support of the notion that intact forests do, in fact, contribute to human well-being. The health benefits of "forest bathing"—*shinrin-yoku* to its Japanese progenitors—are now well documented: interacting with the forest is good for us bipeds. Perhaps amazingly, this also appears to be a two-way street.

"What is *not* as known is that trees actually respond to how we're interacting with them. People have accepted that trees communicate and interact with each other—they respond, emit chemicals, send messages," says Simard. "But we haven't gotten to the step of accepting that they're actually responding to *us*—because then we'd have a responsibility to pay attention and respect those responses."

That, of course, would mean we don't clear-cut them. We don't treat forests like a personal Walmart. We don't take without asking. We don't take if nature's answer is no. Though establishing this hypothesis is the next step in Simard's trajectory of inquiry, she's frankly gun-shy of the blow-back, and has kept herself busy writing a book. It wasn't easy being a pariah for the years after she first shared her discoveries, which is why she appreciated being enfolded into *Treeline*'s cast alongside author Michael Cohen, paleoecologist Connie Millar, Tsukamoto and Tamaki.

"I'm very passionate about forests," she says. "I grew up in them. And here we are introducing our children into this very difficult predicted future. There's going to be tough times ahead. And the crux is that we need to get people back to realizing that we are all part of the ecosystem. We're not some superior race, or something different. We need to get back into the forest, relating to the forest as an equal. An equal to the trees. An equal to the whale."

Simard laughs ruefully at her 'radical' discoveries. "Everything I've discovered [about tree communication] has pretty much been said and known for a long, long time. It's just that I took these little isotopes and counters and measured it and published it in a journal and suddenly it's credible. Aboriginal people have been waiting patiently for us to get this for years: respect and reciprocate with the tree, and show it thanks."

"From the beginning," notes Manley, "I wanted the forests to feel alive, and part of that meant finding characters who feel really alive when they're in the forest and who feel that they're in communication with those places."

This central idea of the film is meant to be catching. And it is.

"I used to ski to get powder," Miyazaki reflects. "So going out to meet a tree was new to me. When you're hiking in the mountains, you can easily get zoned out—just following the guide and the next thing you know you're at the top ready to ski. But if you start looking around, you gain an appreciation for the other beings that are there. It has definitely enriched the way I go through the mountains."

As a fly-fisherman, Manley came to appreciate his quarry, seeing them as a gift. Now he's also conscious of a deeper upwelling of appreciation when he works with wood. "Every time I kill a fish, I tend to say 'thank you.' Not that I think the fish needs to hear that or cares. It's dead. But if we're thanking an animal or a 'resource,' we're appreciating it and, hopefully, willing to take better care of all things that are limited."

Is the message going to be enough? Manley has wondered, even as the film tracks a million views online.

Evans toured the film for Patagonia through ten cities across seven countries. Before each showing, she'd scout around the city, searching out a beautiful local tree to incorporate in her presentation. As a parting nudge to her audience she'd entreat them to seek out arbours in their own backyard and say hi. "Give them some of your attention!" she'd say, in an urging tinged with lament. "I walked so many different types of forest in Europe and didn't seen any of the same kind of trees we have in British Columbia. We take what we have for granted and treat our trees as a commodity. This wildness is already gone from Europe, but I had never realized it could soon be gone here, too."

As I followed my own upwelling instinct to stand in circle with the Douglas-fir in my yard and say thanks—*I breathe in what you breathe out, you breathe in what I breathe out*—it occurred to me that this simple place is where changing the world, and saving the trees, begins. Past the initial burn of outrage. Stepping into loving communion.

Garrett Grove was born in Ventura, CA in 1982 and spent his subsequent years bouncing between Alaska, Washington and British Columbia. He gained a MFA in photography (2017) and his first book, *Errors of Possession*, is being published in late 2019. Garrett currently lives in Sedro-Woolley, WA and can often be found petting his dog Yama. // *garrettgrove.com*