

Living

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Pilgrimage to the canopy

Rain forest canopy endows visitors with newfound appreciation

BY JOHN DODGE
THE OLYMPIAN

PACIFIC COUNTY — A semi-circle of tents cling to a small ridgeline, colorful guests in a family of trees that include Sitka spruce, Douglas fir, Western red cedar, red alder and Western hemlock from ancient to adolescent in age.

Through the trees winds Ellsworth Creek, which plunges into the Naselle River, which in turn feeds into Willapa Bay, shimmering on the horizon in the late summer afternoon sun.

It's a special place near coastal Southwest Washington to appreciate trees, their place in the ecosystem, their power as living things and yes, their utilitarian value.

Scattered in the tree canopies at heights of 40 to 75 feet are wooden platforms held in place with rope, nylon and metal tubes.

The five platforms, which sway with the trees in the afternoon breeze, have played host this summer to an eclectic array of people. They include:

■ **Two Inuits** from the tundra of the Canadian Arctic. Before arriving here in July, these two men had never seen a tree before. Their language contains 18 words for snow, not a single word for tree.

■ **A flutemaker-software engineer** from Seattle who sat in the platforms and played his music for all to hear.

■ **A New York City opera singer-composer** who used her time in the platforms to shape a rain forest opera she has been working on for years.

■ **A timber company executive**, a painter, a partially blind student enrolled at The Evergreen State College; they all



Photos by Tony Overman/The Olympian

TOP INSET: The Nature Conservancy owns 1,840 acres of forest land overlooking the Naselle River and Willapa Bay in Southwest Washington.

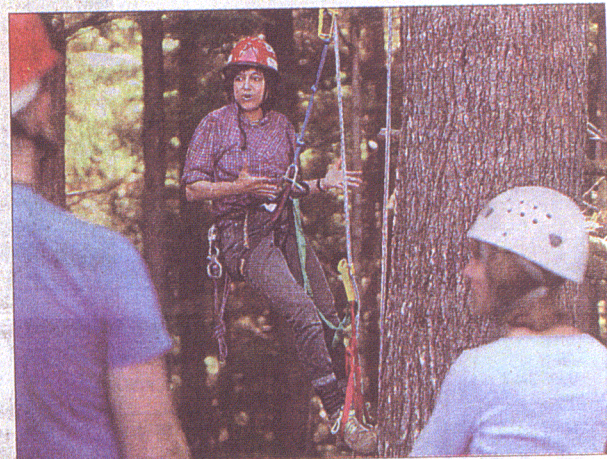
ABOVE: Isaac Marshall, a software engineer, flute maker and musician from Seattle, plays music from a perch 60 feet above the forest

floor near Ellsworth Creek in Southwest Washington. Marshall said the experience of being in the tree canopy took his improvisational jazz to a new level. "Whatever I was playing was right. Whatever I was playing was green," he said.

came to the camp to experience the trees at the invitation of TESC professor Nalini Nadkarni, a world-renowned scientist who has devoted her life to tree canopy research.

Nadkarni, president of the International Canopy Network, has spent 22 years and 5,000 hours climbing in trees, studying and identifying plant and animal life in the tropical rain forests of Costa Rica to the temperate rain forests of Southwest Washington.

But as much as Nadkarni is a scientist and teacher, she is an ambassador on behalf of trees. She's constantly looking for ways to excite people, other than hardcore environmentalists, about the wonderful world of tree canopies, the above-ground realm where 50 percent of the world's plants and animals reside.



Evergreen faculty member Nalini Nadkarni teaches artists how to climb a tree using ropes, which will take them to the canopy platforms up to 65 feet above the ground.

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This summer, at two weeklong camps, she has invited all these people from all over the country to come sleep, eat, laugh, share stories and most importantly — climb — in and amongst the trees on the platforms she and her aides installed.

Call it Camp Nalini.

"It's the greatest thing I've ever done," Nadkarni said, her enthusiasm bursting forth in a rush of words. "It's a big fat experiment."

Aided by a \$20,000 grant from the National Geographic Society, and generous donations of food and gear from Olympia area businesses, Nadkarni hopes to inject a conservation ethic in people who might otherwise never think twice about trees and the forest environment.

At the same time, she eagerly accepts from the camp participants both feedback and new questions worthy of scientific pursuit.

During last week's second camp, Nadkarni's zeal was matched by the 20 or so who have joined for a few hours, or few days.

A special place

Part of the attraction of the experiment is the sheer beauty of the setting.

The camp is perched lightly on land purchased by The Nature Conservancy two years ago. The conservation group's goal is an ambitious one: secure the entire 5,000-acre Ellsworth Creek watershed. If the Conservancy is successful, it will be the only fully protected coastal watershed from central Oregon to the Canadian border.

It's a remote and timeless place 10 miles east of the Long Beach Peninsula that is home to Western red cedar up to 800 years old, wild salmon, one of the largest assortments of amphibians found anywhere in the state and the marbled murrelet, an imperiled, smallish bird that lives at sea, but nests in the forks of old-growth tree branches.

So far, The Nature Conservancy, of which Nadkarni is a board member, has purchased 1,840 acres. From the platforms, the diversity of the landscape is evident, from patches of rugged, old-growth trees to tree plantations previously managed for logging.

After introductions, each camper receives a short course in how to climb trees using a system of ropes, pulleys, fasteners and, of course, a helmet.

Nadkarni is wary of anyone who says they're not afraid of heights. A healthy fear keeps the mind alert and focused, she noted.

At the same time, she grimaces at the notion that tree-climbing is



Tony Overman/The Olympian

Judith Sainte-Croix, an opera composer from New York City, sits 50 feet above the forest floor and records her singing as she overlooks the surrounding forest.

some kooky, dangerous sport.

"It's a lot more dangerous to drive out here than it is to climb in the trees," she said.

Whatever inner fears they have, the camp participants in large part conquer them.

"I'm just having a ball," New York City opera singer-composer Judith Sainte-Croix said after spending the morning in the 40-foot-high platform. "I'm in the trees singing, throwing my voice across the valley."

After seven years of work, Sainte-Croix has just completed a rain forest opera she hopes to bring to a New York stage soon.

"This experience will definitely influence the set and the orchestration of the opera," she said.

Isaac Marshall, a Seattle software engineer, flutemaker and flutist, can't get enough time in the platforms. At lunch, he eats with his climbing gear on, anxious to get back in the trees, accompanied by his flute.

"It's a rush — I love it," he said, adding proudly that one of his melodic offerings was quickly followed by the trumpeting of a nearby bull elk.

Artists dominated the second camp. But at least one timber company executive ventured into camp to climb — Mike Mosman, vice president of resources for the Seattle-based Port Blakely Tree Farms.

"To feel the tree move under-

neath you is to realize it's a living thing," he said. "It was a confirmation that we're all people of the woods."

Mosman, who has worked with Nadkarni on research projects, hopes the campers come away from the woods as advocates for forests, including the ones that are harvested for wood products.

"Anything that reinforces that growing trees is the best use of the land is a positive," he said.

For Lynette Romero, a psychology student at Evergreen State College, the trip to Camp Nalini required an extra effort. She is sight-impaired.

"I am losing my vision fast and I don't get out in the forests," she told her fellow campers during a get-acquainted session after lunch.

She said she came to camp to experience the solitude of the forest, in part to compare to the solitude of losing her sight.

A painter and Evergreen faculty member, Susan Aurand talked with Nadkarni at great length during the months leading up to the summer camps. She wasn't about to miss out.

Aurand spent two hours Thursday on the 70-foot-high platform, putting on canvas what she saw.

It was a painting of the platform tree and nearby trees from the perspective of looking down.

"She's looking down!" Nadkarni exclaimed when Aurand returned to camp with her work. "That's the first one looking down."

Was it hard to paint in such an unusual setting? Aurand was asked.

"Being up in the canopy really made me focus," she said. "There's no distractions."

Nadkarni and her aides broke camp today, but not before a film crew from the National Geographic Society chronicled the odd, yet powerful, event that unfolded here.

And not before the forests of the Pacific Northwest gained some new-found ambassadors.

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