

High on Conservation

This Washington state forest ecologist and professor shares her research, and her convictions, literally from the treetops.
By Janet Arenofsky

In 1994 Nadkarni co-founded the International Canopy Network (ICAN; canopy@evergreen.edu), which encourages communication among scientists, educators, and conservationists. More recently, Nadkarni created the field of "ecoinformatics." Gathering together forest canopy researchers and computer scientists, she asked these experts to develop practical reference resources, including database tools, that ecologists with no prior knowledge of computer programming skills could easily access. Nadkarni now gives hands-on workshops on the three that resulted: a database designer called DataBank; a visualization tool, CanopyView; and a reference website, Big Canopy Database, or BCD, at www.canopy.evergreen.edu/bcd. Although Nadkarni has no trouble conveying her enthusiasm for environmental science, it wasn't always so easy. In college, modern dance and pre-med studies absorbed her, but after a summer's employment in a hospital, Nadkarni abandoned medicine. Her new career choice emerged from childhood memories of safety and security.

Says Nadkarni, "Whenever I felt overwhelmed and needed a refuge from the chaotic parenting techniques of an Indian father and Jewish mother, I climbed a nearby maple tree."

This intimacy with nature has led her to discover various connections between trees and disciplines such as health, recreation, and the arts. Her goal is to devise outreach programs to educate the public about the global need for forest conservation. Nadkarni's efforts have taken her to many venues, among them churches, synagogues, skateboards



professor and forest ecologist shares her research—and her beliefs about connections with spirituality, health, and other subjects—literally from the treetops.

It's all in a day's work. Whenever forest ecologist Nadkarni, a professor at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, isn't teaching or mentoring, she's scaling the heights of tropical or temperate rainforests in Monteverde, Papua New Guinea, Costa Rica, or Washington state.

"Climbing a tree is a spiritual experience," says Nadkarni, whose research tools have included a hot air balloon and a 35-story gondola-like crane. "It's very intimate (with trees). . . you can even smell the pine pitch. You trust the trees and their branches to hold you."

With her harness and helmet and jumars (mechanical rope ascenders), Nadkarni is a scientist able to connect with a popular audience. A recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and grants from the National Science Foundation and the National Geographic Society, Nadkarni is often referred to as the "queen of the forest canopy." Since graduating from Brown University in 1976, she has researched forest canopies and their varied ecosystems. She has written more than 80 academic papers and two scholarly books on subjects such as root distribution, species diversity, tree damage, and mosses and liverworts.



With her harness and helmet and jumars (mechanical rope ascenders), Nadkarni is a scientist able to connect with a popular audience.

Nalini Nadkarni

