In Our Element – with Linda France

Episode 6: Wood

TRANSCRIPT

Linda France:

In Our Element: A poet's enquiry into climate change. Episode 6: Wood.

Linda France:

This last year, I've spent more time with trees than I have with human beings. And they've been excellent companions. Strong, reliable, beautiful to look at and good listeners. Friends, not just to me, but also to birds, squirrels and insects. It's hard to feel lonely around a tree. [Music swells]

Sian Atkinson:

I just wanted to point out to you a species over here. So this grass here, you can see this very, very delicate grass.

Linda France:

I'm in Pontburn Woods. A Woodland Trust managed wood in the Derwent Valley, County Durham with Sian Atkinson, who's worked in woodland conservation for nearly three decades.

Sian Atkinson:

That's called wood melick and it's an ancient woodland indicator plant. So you will largely find that in areas of undisturbed, continuously wooded woodland habitat like this. Woods and trees, I think are just so important. We have quite low woodland cover in this country now. It's on average around 13%, which is about a 1/3 of what it is in Europe as a whole. Obviously the trees soak up carbon. Trees are obviously one of the potential mitigations for climate change, but they also help us to tackle air pollution, so they absorb particulates; they produce oxygen; they can help with flood alleviations, so the right trees in the right place can help to slow the flow; they improve water quality, so along rivers that can filter out pollutants going into the water.

Linda France:

I also heard they play an enormous part in lowering the temperatures in cities. So now where the summers are just heating up considerably and people are struggling.

Sian Atkinson:

Yes, they do. So partly obviously they provide shade, but also through their transpiration, through the evaporation of water from their leaves, that actually has a cooling effect as well.

Linda France:

Records reveal that for the first time, what is seen as our planet's lungs, the Amazon Rainforest, is emitting more carbon than it absorbs. It's against this unsettling backdrop that I'm talking with

the poet, Pascale Petit, whose two latest much lauded collections: Mama Amazonica and Tiger Girl, look environmental destruction fiercely in the eye.

Pascale Petit:

I think the trees to me are a mystery. I think we actually know very little about trees. That's the thing. They operate on a different time than we do. It doesn't mean that they're lifeless or unsentient, it just means that they're different. They move very slowly, but if you speed it up, they're actually very active beings. That's one thing that I'm always trying to depict when I try to write about trees because they're not those inert things. So I think that we don't understand trees and maybe they are the prime occupants of earth, for all we know.

Linda France:

Approximately 240 million years before human life appeared, the first trees were evolving, and they still carry a strong sense of time in their remarkable, diverse forms. The mysterious past, this fragile present and an unknowable future.

Linda France:

It's beautiful, isn't it?

Sian Atkinson:

Yeah. You feel like you're in another world altogether, don't you? It's really shady.

Linda France:

Dappled shade, yeah.

Sian Atkinson:

And the sound is muffled. So you don't hear the sound of the aeroplanes and the road quite so clearly and you just immediately feel sort of enclosed in this kind of slightly magical little world. Yeah. And I love this wood because it's got these twisty old oak trees, so it's got a really nice feel to it.

Linda France:

So oak and then the smaller ones, like rowan and...

Sian Atkinson:

There's a lot of holly in here.

Linda France:

Yeah.

Sian Atkinson:

There's rowan. There's other parts of the wood we'll see areas that are more dominated by birch. But beech, there's a lot of beech in this wood, which is why it's quite shady. It's a very densely shading species.

Linda France:

And honeysuckle, twining up there, that's very lovely.

Sian Atkinson:

Honeysuckle, yeah.

Sian Atkinson:

I think people see woodlands and they think they've been here a long time. Trees are very long-lived organisms. They're a very permanent sort of feature. And you sort of feel like there's something stable in the landscape, there's something that's doing okay. And I think what a lot of people don't realize is that a lot of our woods are actually not in a very great state.

Sian Atkinson:

Many of our woods have been fragmented - so the development or clearance for farming or whatever - a lot of the remaining woods are actually quite small. So they're very vulnerable to the edge effects of what's going on around them: run off of nutrients from farmland, air pollution from industrial areas or whatever. The core area of the wood that's actually not being affected by that can be actually really very small or even non-existent in a very small wood. Our woods and our trees are under tress and there's a massive increase in tree pest and diseases in this country over last couple of decades, probably. I think everybody's probably heard of ash dieback in recent years. And ash sort of has a unique place within the woodland ecosystem it has a particular role within nutrient cycling, it has quite alkaline bark, which supports particular ranges of lichens and so on, that many other trees don't support so well. So there's no sort of exact replacement for it within the spectrum of our native trees.

Linda France:

It's often associated, isn't it, with Yggdrasil.

Sian Atkinson:

Yes.

Linda France:

The Norse idea of the tree of life, the tree of the worlds. And if that dies, the world will perish. So it does have a great mythological weight.

Sian Atkinson:

It does. And that's a very sobering thought, isn't it?

Linda France:

In Pascal's poems, there's a sense of mythmaking. Webs spun for self protection and healing.

Pascale Petit:

One day as we were going through the Amazon Rainforest and I was saying, please can we go back to the big trees, which I love. We came across the giant kapok, which had fallen. And so this is the silk cotton tree. It's a tree that produces gorgeous rosy pink flowers and it's a kind of

tree of life for the people there. So I asked the guide, why did it fall? Was it a lightning strike? And he said, no, no, look, look at it. It was absolutely covered with orchids. He said it's because of all the creatures that live in her. It's the orchids. There are so many of them that it must have felled her.

Pascale Petit:

So this is ‘Kapok’.

It’s only when the queen of the forest
has fallen that we see how many crutches
she needed to keep upright –
her mesh of roots pulled up
the topsoil and it’s shallow as felt.
Where was she going in her walking frame?
These buttresses and vines she leant against
didn’t help her move forward
and why should she? Here
she had her portion of sun; there
was the darkness of others. No,
she moved upwards, turning her stiff
body into a ladder to climb towards
the leaves of light in their spiral groves,
her face so furrowed no one noticed it.
What burdens she bore to keep her back
upright: the harpies in their heavy nest
pressed on her shoulder,
capuchins inside her armpits.
Tamanduas, toucans, trogons –
all clung to her. And her skin had growths –
a termite’s nest, a beehive.
Tree porcupines dozed in her clefts,
a jaguar slept on her lowest limb,
and lower still a bushmaster curled between her toes.
The treefrogs in their bromeliad ponds
multiplied every year, and always,
processions of army ants plagued her.
But it wasn’t these lodgers that felled her –
it was the hanging gardens of orchids draped
on her balconies, like worshippers in a cathedral
kneeling in pews, throngs of them
drinking the rain that filtered softly
through her storeys, like sacramental wine,
their faces lifted to divine moths.

Linda France:

Thank you. Thank you so much, Pascale. That poem is remarkable in the way that it expresses something about the fullness of nature that contains both beauty and terror, the complexity of things, the interdependence of things.

Pascale Petit:

Yes, it's like she's a forest in herself, the tree. I think that's what I love about her. And the orchids are pollinated by the moths. And even there's like miniature seas in all the bromeliad air plants, with their own ecosystems inside. So she's almost like a tree of heaven. And it's almost like there's planets on each branch.

Linda France:

Like trees, we are vertical beings, standing up right on the earth, heads held up to the sky. We even share a quarter of our DNA. They are less unlike us than they might appear.

Sian Atkinson:

There's been quite a lot, recently written, about how trees almost communicate with each other. Below the ground there's a whole network of fungi. Mycorrhizal fungi, they're called. So these are fungi that grow in association with plants. So they might grow in association with the grasses and other plants, or they might grow in association with the trees. What these mycorrhizal fungi do, is they help to support the trees and provide some nutrients to the trees. But they also create a network between the trees and there's been some sort of suggestions that signals pass between trees through these mycorrhizal networks, which is really fascinating. And one of the things that I read was that when you go into a wood, the trees are almost kind of warning each other that you're coming. But I just absolutely love that idea really, that they are actually aware in some way that you're there. And I think it's very difficult for us to get our heads around the idea of trees being aware and having awareness, because it may be not the kind of awareness that we think of ourselves as having. How far you take it, I think is up to you. But I think there's no doubt at all, that there's a lot more going on below ground and within a forest than just individual trees standing there.

Linda France:

It's part of the animist way of thinking. Isn't it? That everything does have a consciousness. Has a responsiveness to everything else.

Sian Atkinson:

It just makes you think about the woodland in a different way, and almost feel more part of it. Part of what's going on in that whole network of communication that's going on in a habitat. But they also, being in woodlands or being near trees, actually has been proven to have really strong benefits for people's physical and mental health. The trees give off chemicals that actually make us feel better. You could go into a wood and feel as though actually the trees are doing something to look after you.

Linda France:

Yeah, I believe it's supposed to lower cortisol levels. So it brings down your stress levels. It lowers blood pressure and also balances out blood sugars, so it's helpful for people with

diabetes. I mean, incredible things that happen. But the other thing that I love about it is that apparently scientists can't actually quantify these chemical compounds. They can't pin it down.

Sian Atkinson:

You know, we don't have to be able to quantify everything, we can just go and experience it and feel intuitively.

Linda France:

Absolutely.

Linda France:

I wrote this poem after noticing for myself, the benefits of spending time among trees.

Linda France:

‘Wood-bathing’

Even late in the year you grasp the gift
of it – cortisol, blood sugar, pulse

settling as you walk and breathe in
whatever the trees breathe out

on a day bright as washed glass;
the glancing spangles on a brazen

sweetgum, handspan leaves trembling.
Whiskers of pine glitter against

your irises; a birch’s ginger you want
to photograph and keep, you

who can’t keep track of your own breath,
shallow and ragged, with a mind of its own.

Let this be enough, this organic exchange
of oxygen and subtle odours

no one can quantify. The Japanese
call it ‘wood-bathing’, *shinrin-yoku,*

as if it were an art or a medicine.
Take daily – forest, arbour, garden, park.

Linda France:

But what happens when we cut down the trees, we depend on? It's happening in this country and all over the world. The scale of the destruction of the Amazonian rainforest is deeply

disturbing. This is Pascale Petit again, whose collection Mama Amazonica interweaves her complex family history with her experience of the Amazon.

Pascale Petit:

One of the most amazing sights of my life is looking down on the Canopy. All the different shades of green. But you also see deforested areas. So you see bare forest. In Mama Amazonica, I portray my mother as the Amazon Rainforest because my mother was very severely mentally ill. And so I portrayed the Amazon Rainforest as a patient, a mentally ill patient who had been abused and raped as my mother had been. So the two systems kind of were laid on top of each other.

Linda France:

It is the poets particular gift. What the poet can do. The poet can, I think you use the phrase, 'weave a forest with two leaves'. So from two very small things, you can make a whole forest. Just very small words you can actually have a very strong and powerful effect.

Pascale Petit:

Yeah. I'm a witness, an observer. In Tiger Girl I wanted to celebrate and explore my grandmother's Indian heritage. The world seemed to be on fire. There were so many forests across the world on fire. And when I went to Bandhavgarh to see tigers, I felt Bandhavgarh was safe from fire. And so I was writing about the fire in the Amazon, in the Australian Bush, in New South Wales and in California. But since then, in late spring this year, Bandhavgarh was on fire. So in this poem, 'Flash Forest', it actually came from an image that I found of an orphaned faun, actually huddling against a target practice that was carved as a deer. The Ficus Religiosa is the prayer tree of... The holy tree of India. And it is one that the fruit bats love to hang from in roost during the day.

‘Flash Forests’

Just as an orphaned fawn
will huddle against the wooden deer
used for target practice –

so I cling to you, my grandmother,
while all around us
the forests burn.

~

It is I who turned
the world ash Yggdrasil
to ashes,

I who watched on plasma screens
as koalas charred,
I who saw sloths

with rare eco-systems
on their upside-down fur,
cremated in backdrafts.

~

Let me be your bat pup
and you can be
my ficus religiosa.

I'm hugging what's left –
aerial roots of your hair
I once buried my face in.

I'll roost under
your prayer leaves
until the flames come.

Linda France:

Pascale Petit, ending our 'Wood' episode. In Our Element is presented by me, Linda France. It's a Sonderbug production with New Writing North, in association with Newcastle University, and it's supported by the audio Content Fund and Arts Council, England. Thank you for listening.

[Music swells]