

How an Old-Growth Redwood Taught Me to Survive a Poppy Apocalypse

by Colby Devitt



This spring I went to see the wildflowers on a Friday to beat the weekend’s “poppy apocalypse” caused by hordes descending on the epic super bloom. Traffic clogged the freeway exit to the ecological reserve south of Los Angeles. Instagram influencers dressed in Coachella-inspired white dresses dotted the fields. People staged photo shoots for children, dogs, and weddings. The Instagrammers made me feel lazy. I should have dressed up for my hike—I knew the photo op I was getting into. Shirking my hair and makeup did not prevent me from pulling out my phone every few minutes to record the beauty. Sure, I spend much of my time staring into a computer screen, but that’s not my authentic brand. I eagerly joined the poppy-razzi and got my shots of nature’s orange carpet.

If I lived in a world where poppies abounded and people were scarce (aka, not Los Angeles), I would have danced through the fields like I was in the Sound of Music. There were scads of news stories begging us not to and I dutifully stayed on the trails. Though most practiced restraint, too many people damaged the flowers. Surprisingly, it was left to the visitors to police

their bad behavior. I chastised a man for squashing some poppies while thrusting his giant camera into their cousins. He insisted that he sat on weeds not poppies, and knew the difference between them. One man's weed is another woman's yet-to-bloom flower.



The profusion of people among this floral exuberance made me anxious. It triggered my climate calculus of guilt and shame, which goes like this:

Thought #1: If I really loved these poppies, I would stay away and let them be.

Thought #2: Natural phenomena like these are among my life's greatest joys and I won't stay away.

Thus, the guilt.

A barrage of questions follows:

- How worthy is my footprint? (Worthy.)
- Am I walking carefully on the land? (I think so.)
- What about the expenditure in fossil fuel it took to drive here? (Not good.)

- What about that new development community I saw from the freeway? It destroyed more poppies than all of us in these fields, so how responsible am I? (Not sure.)
- Shouldn't I park these energy, land use and population issues at the feet of policymakers who can best address them? (Lame.)
- Who invited this priggish voice into my head? (Yuck.)
- Why complain when most people aren't lucky enough to be here? (Gratitude is the only worthy response to this gorgeousness.)

Thus, the shame.

My climate calculus is rooted in scarcity and it's destructive. There's the scarcity of time left to reduce our carbon emissions and salvage dying species. There's the scarcity of wild land untrammelled by humans. There's also the scarcity of my imagination. I was raised on the Romantic notion that being in nature frees the soul. (Think Ansel Adams and John Muir.)



It's really hard to connect to the idea of nature as freedom in a crowded in ecological reserve snuggled up to the 15 freeway where I can't dance in the wildflowers.

My calculus makes me crave to go to wilder places and enjoy them before people ruin them. This urge to do whatever it takes to hunt down remaining pristine places is a response to my heartbreak when confronted with ecocide and loss. My craving first erupted in 2016 when I dived the Great Barrier Reef during the worst bleaching in its history. Over half of the reef died and I was grief-struck. Unable to find enough life in the reef after five days of three dives a day, I was ready to go into debt to fly to tonier portions of the reef accessible only to scientists and the wealthy who can afford the private planes to fly there. But those places were dying too, and even if I had the money to get there, there was no there to be found.

A week after my poppy excursion, I drove up to the Santa Cruz Mountains for a longstanding appointment. A few years ago, my girlhood dream of climbing a redwood was reawakened when I read *The Wild Trees* by Richard Preston and I was finally on my way to climb an old-growth redwood.

On the drive up, I turned off my internal fossil fuel calculator and listened to Peter Wohlleben’s book, *The Hidden Life of Trees*. Forests are superorganisms filled with trees that are sentient and social individuals. In these “wood wide webs” mother trees talk with their children, guiding future generations. By contrast, trees outside of forests and plants enslaved in our agricultural systems have lost the ability to communicate and are rendered deaf and dumb. Urban trees whose roots grow into pipes aren’t looking for water. They’re looking for uncompacted soil and to connect to a forest.

The redwood tree we were climbing was located on private property in a mountain exurb of the Silicon Valley overlooking the Soquel Demonstration Forest. (It’s illegal to climb redwoods in the parks.) The area was heavily logged until the late 1980s and 95% of the original old-growth redwoods harvested. Today, the Soquel is still actively logged and used for research and mountain biking. About 500 old-growth redwoods remain and its oldest is around the same age as the tree we were about to climb—about 800 years.

Our ascent into the canopy was led by the master tree climbing instructor, Tim Kovar. As we hoisted ourselves up via the rope pulley, the pace of time changed. I gazed up at the vast trunk and back down at the ground nearby. The size of the tree was nearly unfathomable.

“It looks like we’re almost on the ground,” Tim said. “But we’re already 60 feet up.”

The tree was a wondrous ecosystem. It had buttresses three feet high that held massive horizontal branches out of which sprung rows of other trees, including a large tanoak. Beside it was a fairy ring of redwoods, a circle of clone trees springing from one root. We ascended beyond the crown of a tall neighboring tree that lightning had flattened a decade ago.



From these heights, 150 or so feet off the ground, I could see the ocean 20 miles away and the secondary growth forest. I wondered if this tree missed being with others its age. Could it sense the elder redwood in the Soquel forest? I wondered what it thought of the enslaved saplings on

the Christmas tree farm down the road. And what did it think of us? Did it consider us an enemy, or did it wait patiently for us to evolve?

I started to get the familiar craving for more. What I craved was an old-growth forest. I longed to go into the Lost Coast where an old-growth redwood forest remained.

We climbed higher into the canopy and Tim suggested we take five minutes to hang in silence. I saw him check his watch and knew he was serious about the five minutes. I listened to birds and a distant airplane. The wind sang in the canopy. This tree experienced a year's worth of my weather events in one day. The five minutes seemed like thirty seconds or thirty minutes. I couldn't tell. Time slipped into infinity.

The redwood calmed me.

After we descended, Tim told us that he hoped we would be ambassadors for these trees.

"People are so disconnected. They don't even notice the trees around them."

As we drove to San Francisco in rush hour traffic, I pitied the isolated trees adorning the 101 freeway. The city is my hometown and every time I return I appreciate its beauty. Now, as I looked on the green but treeless hills of South San Francisco, I saw the scene of an ancient crime whose case had long been closed. I wanted reparations.

This was the first time I had ever had this thought. It's hard to miss what you don't know existed.

I tried to imagine what it would be like to co-exist here with an old-growth forest, or just a forest—a place where wildlife corridors existed both above ground and below; a place where we did not slaughter our ancients and poison the creatures we wanted to keep at bay; a place where we could co-create our ideal habitat. My first thought was fire. I have family living on the frontlines of California's worst wildfires. The places I call native are ones a wiser person might wish to flee.

But I did not want to flee. The equanimity that the redwood bequeathed me brought more than peace of mind. It brought the freedom to imagine. I was like a deaf and dumb sapling, raised in disconnection, feeling for the openings to connect to the forest that grows around us.