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«Katie's 2020 National Endowment for the Arts-supported interpretive installation welcomes visitors to Jackson's newest park. Credit: Cristine Wehner



THE LAND OF INTERPRETATIONS

BY KATIE SHEPHERD CHRISTIANSEN, NRCC ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

Among many identities, I am an artist. I paint images of wildlife using watercolor. To create my art, I deconstruct the subject – a wren, a trout, an owl's nest – into minute swaths of color and texture. Then stroke by stroke, I build back the subject's form to exist on my page as a sum of entangled parts.

Each wildlife portrait is a symphony of shapes and colors, a collection of countless strokes of my paintbrush, a community of interacting elements. An ecosystem interpreting an ecosystem.

In 1935, British ecologist Sir Arthur George Tansley coined the term "ecosystem" to mean an ecological community: *the function and structure of life* and the environment supporting it. The introduction of the ecosystem concept by Tansley and contemporaries transformed our understanding of the natural world. Ecosystems gave us a view of nature as an interconnected community, dynamic and evolving, yet occurring within structured processes that tend to maintain the system as a whole. Though revolutionary at the time, Tansley's ecological insight provided only half of the story. The ecosystem concept told us something about the world, but not what we should do about it.

While scientists explored this new framing of nature, philosophy professor Aldo Leopold began work on what would

become one of conservation's foundational texts: *A Sand County Almanac*. Published in 1948, the book urges a revisiting of the concept of community. Leopold's "Land Ethic" expands community values beyond the confines of a single species – *Homo sapiens* – so that the community to which one engages also includes the likes of plants, animals, water, and soils – an ecosystem.

To Tansley's scientific revelation of ecosystems, Leopold gave us an ethical framework. The land ethic captures a moral responsibility in the preservation of community. In Leopold's words, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." Leopold translated "ecosystem" from an idea existing beyond one's immediate reference to a meaning imbued with values and corresponding action.

Values and ethics influence how we make sense of what we encounter in life: ourselves, other people, ideas, relationships, nature. These value-determined interpretations of life (in which we engage constantly, usually subconsciously) inform how we – individually and as societies – navigate life through our thoughts and actions.

An "ecosystem" is not just a sterile biological concept. Both the physical ecosystem and the idea of one are outlets for discovering meaning in each of our

lives. One's personal interpretation of an ecosystem will be influenced by one's understanding of self, of nature, and of community. Our values are the lens through which we see and translate the world into a meaningful whole.

Philosophers like Leopold, and writers, educators, community leaders, and advocates, even scientists and elected officials, are all value translators. These are the architects of the future we create together.

I am an artist, and so too I am a value translator.

My artwork is an outward expression of who I am and the values I hold. Inherent to my paintings is a specific interpretation of the natural world. I weave values of nature and community into every piece, translating the natural world from concept to meaning through a visual image. My paintings offer alternative ways of connecting to nature: connections of beauty and awe, of awareness and recognition, of respect and responsibility. I paint to influence our shared values in a land ethic – a value commitment that I believe is nothing less than essential for maintaining life on earth.

Here in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, divergent and competing value translations compromise the potential to realize a shared community ethic. In the absence of a collective

vision for surviving together in this ecosystem, let alone on this planet, our attempts to realize a sustainable future will forever fall short of our goal. The future of the Greater Yellowstone is endangered by ever-expanding human development, intensifying tourism, corrosive extractive industries, unrestrained outdoor recreation, harmful pressures on wildlife, in-motion climate change, and continued biodiversity loss. How individuals and institutions make meaning of these 22-million acres, and the life and environment interacting across it, are determining this ecosystem's chances of survival.

Are our interpretations of this place up for these enormous challenges? Or are they carrying us towards inevitable ecological disintegration, threatening the health of human and wild communities alike? I believe misaligned values are leading us down a path of destruction. However, if we choose it, we may yet hop a trail towards a different future.

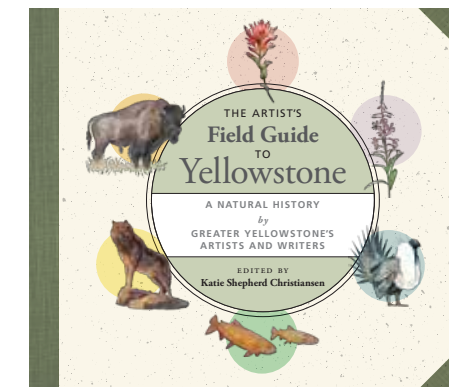
The intractability of the values-problem we face in the Greater Yellowstone is that it's obscured by seemingly simpler problems in the foreground. The masquerading values-problem registers as a physical wildlife problem (solved by removing a barrier fence), a management problem (improved by making better decisions), a coexistence problem (addressed by removing houses in migration routes), even a climate problem (lessened by wildfire preparedness). And so we focus on solving these apparent problems, believing we are taking care of the real business at hand. This work is important, but problem-solving exclusively

at this level ignores the deeper values-problem and prevents us from making any real headway on the crisis before us.

As much as we try, we can't get at what underlies this crisis by only attending to these misidentified, superficial problems. At the heart of this crisis is a deep chasm between our values today and the practical thinking required for our survival. Attending to this must become the thrust of our efforts.

We must get going and we must go deep, beginning with a clear acknowledgment of the challenge that value conflicts present, and moving onto a ground-level resorting of values in society and policy, from the individual to the institution. Only through values work can we hope to unravel the destructive habits of thinking that have led to our current, unsustainable ways of living on this finite planet.

Transforming our understanding of ourselves and of nature can bring us together around a land ethic, such as the one envisioned by Leopold: "a shared vision for how we engage with the world in order to survive on it."



I am an artist and a value translator.

I am also a mother.

The world occurring around my infant son is in turmoil — a global pandemic, climate-change impacted weather events, existential crises on our doorsteps, the breakdown of democracies, societies verging on collapse, rampant disregard for human dignity — all as my son takes his first steps and vocalizes interpretations of his world, "Mama," "Dada," "Ball."

"Mama."

I am reminded that in the face of what seems impossible, we must remain diligent and urgently attend to our survival on earth.

I am a mother, and so too I am a value translator.

I deconstruct the world so my son can see nature's interacting, incommutable parts. Then, in time, we will build back to the whole, complicated, tangled web that is life: his community — his ecosystem.

The Artist's Field Guide to Yellowstone: A Natural History by Greater Yellowstone's Artists and Writers, published by Trinity University Press and edited by Katie Shepherd Christiansen, will be released Spring 2021. For more information about this long-awaited publication and to purchase the book, please visit NRCC's website.



«Katie's illustration of nesting Chipping Sparrow created for a forthcoming Sacajawea Audubon interpretive installation.

NRCC's Artist in Residence, Katie Shepherd Christiansen works across disciplines to advance sustainable wild and human communities. In celebration of the 2020 opening of Jackson's Astoria Hot Springs Park, Katie was awarded National Endowment for the Arts funding to create a permanent, interpretive natural history artwork welcoming visitors to the park. Her naturalist artwork and interpretive writing are also newly featured this year in protected areas in Bozeman, Boulder County Colorado, and Tennessee's Wade Bourne Nature Center. Katie is Director of Conservation Strategy & Outreach at the Wild Foundation.