Suggested Reading

KWOA is starting a series of book reviews for fiction and non-fiction books that may be of interest to members. If you have a favorite book related to forestry please send the title to editor@kwoa.net. If you have read this issue’s book choice, we’d love to hear what you thought about it. Send comments to editor@kwoa.net.

*The Hidden Life of Trees*

*What They Feel, How They Communicate*

By Peter Wohlleben

English translation 2016, Greystone Books Ltd., Vancouver, BC, Canada

Peter Wohlleben is a German forester who gave up his position with the forestry commission in Germany to manage a forest as a nature preserve for the community of Hummel. He switched to horse-logging, eliminated insecticides and began letting the woods grow wilder.

*The Hidden Life of Trees* busts many long accepted premises about forests such as:

- *Spacing out trees on plantation forests ensures that they get more sunlight and grow faster.* Wohlleben asserts that light depredation for younger trees due to the crowns of more mature trees slows their growth which is a prerequisite if a tree is to live to a ripe old age (page 33). In addition, trees such as beeches are more productive when they are packed together where the fungi network can act as a redistribution mechanism (page 16).

- *As trees mature their growth rate slows.* On the contrary, the older the tree, the more quickly it grows. If we want to use forests as a weapon in the fight against climate change, then we must allow them to grow old (pages 97-98).

- *When trees begin to sicken, it is the beginning of the end.* Even strong trees get sick a lot over the course of their lives and may depend on weaker neighbors for support (page 17).

- *The thousands of nuts produced by a single tree will ensure a future generation.* A mature beech tree can produce about 1.8 million beechnuts in an average lifetime. From these, exactly one will develop into a full-gown tree (page 29).

Trees are connected through their root systems in what Wohlleben terms the “wood wide web” of soil fungi that exchange nutrients and help sickly neighbors.

Although Wohlleben is criticized by some as anthropomorphizing nature, he makes the complex biological aspects of forestry understandable and interesting to non-scientists while backing his ideas with scientific research and data. A review of Wohlleben’s book in the March 2018 issue of The Smithsonian notes that Wohlleben “has a rare understanding of the inner life of trees, and is able to describe it in accessible, evocative language.” (“The Whispering of the Trees” by Richard Grant, pp. 48-57.

With the current decimation by fire of forests in the west, I find Wohlleben’s findings in his chapter on the forest as water pump to be one of the most disturbing tenets of his book. Through transpiration coastal forests release water vapor that travels inland to be released as rain for inland forests. He posits that coastal forests are the foundation for this system and without it the system falls apart. On a related point, he refutes the idea that old growth forests are taken over by shrubby growth and brambles. Instead, he finds that old leaves predominate on the forest floor because of the deep shade, keeping it cool, damp and evenly regulated.

Watch a TV interview with Wohlleben at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/sep/12/peter-wohlleben-man-who-believes-trees-talk-to-each-other>

 Listen to a TED talk, “How Trees Talk to Each Other,” by another forest ecologist referenced extensively in Wohlleben’s book - Suzanne Simard, University of British Columbia - whose new discoveries are challenging the Western scientific method:

<https://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne_simard_how_trees_talk_to_each_other/up-next>