

Nalini Nadkarni

Interviewed by Susan Straight

Nalini Nadkarni is an ecologist and professor at the University of Utah, a pioneer of treetop canopy research, a National Geographic Explorer, and an adviser for Mattel's new line of Explorer Barbies. She has won numerous major awards, such as a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship and an AAAS Public Engagement with Science Award. She is a fearless science communicator who has worked with prisons, pastors, physicians, policy makers, and more to engage all people in science and conservation.

How would you say you've broken down so many silos?

The work I have done in public engagement is about revealing existing common ground between different spheres of understanding and taking action in the world. I like to envision this as a “tapestry of understanding.”

You recently started delivering sermons in churches and synagogues?

I learned that over 80% of people on our planet identify as being religious or believing in a higher being. That is a far larger percentage than those who self-identify as environmentalists. I searched the holy scriptures of the world's religions for all references to “tree” and “forest” and compiled a sermon, “Trees and Spirituality,” which I have delivered to over 40 congregations. We were able to open up dialogues, organize tree plantings, and discuss ways that seminarians could include more science in their trainings.

What frontiers are left in terms of forest ecology?

So many frontiers in forest ecology remain! These involve places within forests—such as the below-ground world of roots and fungi. I think the biggest challenge is working at the interface of forests and people—recognizing that humans are integral in nearly every forest ecosystem. Yet we do not yet know how our actions—harvesting, reducing biodiversity, landscape-level changes—will affect forest health and vitality in the future.



Photo courtesy Nalini Nadkarni

What's an example of a challenge you've had to overcome to get people to listen to you?

When talking with state prison administrators, I learned that I needed to carry out “intellectual humility” and place the values of “the other” ahead of mine. It was when I linked science education to the documented reduction of recidivism and increased probability of post-release employment that I was finally able to make progress bringing science lectures and conservation projects to state prisons.

You've won countless awards and distinctions.

What's next?

Fashion! Fashion is an important part of the lives of many people. So it seems a good idea to use clothing and fashion to transmit messages about the importance of nature and biodiversity to those who might not otherwise care very much about it. I've been working with designers in NYC to begin the creation of an “eco-fashion” line. [These] are clothes that are made of fabric that is printed with botanically correct images of trees and other plants, made into garments, and accompanied by hangtags that provide scientifically sound information about the biology and conservation of the species depicted. That way, everyone who wears the clothing can become a walking, talking educator and conservation advocate.

For the audio file and full transcript of this interview, visit astc.org/category/astc-dimensions/q-and-a.