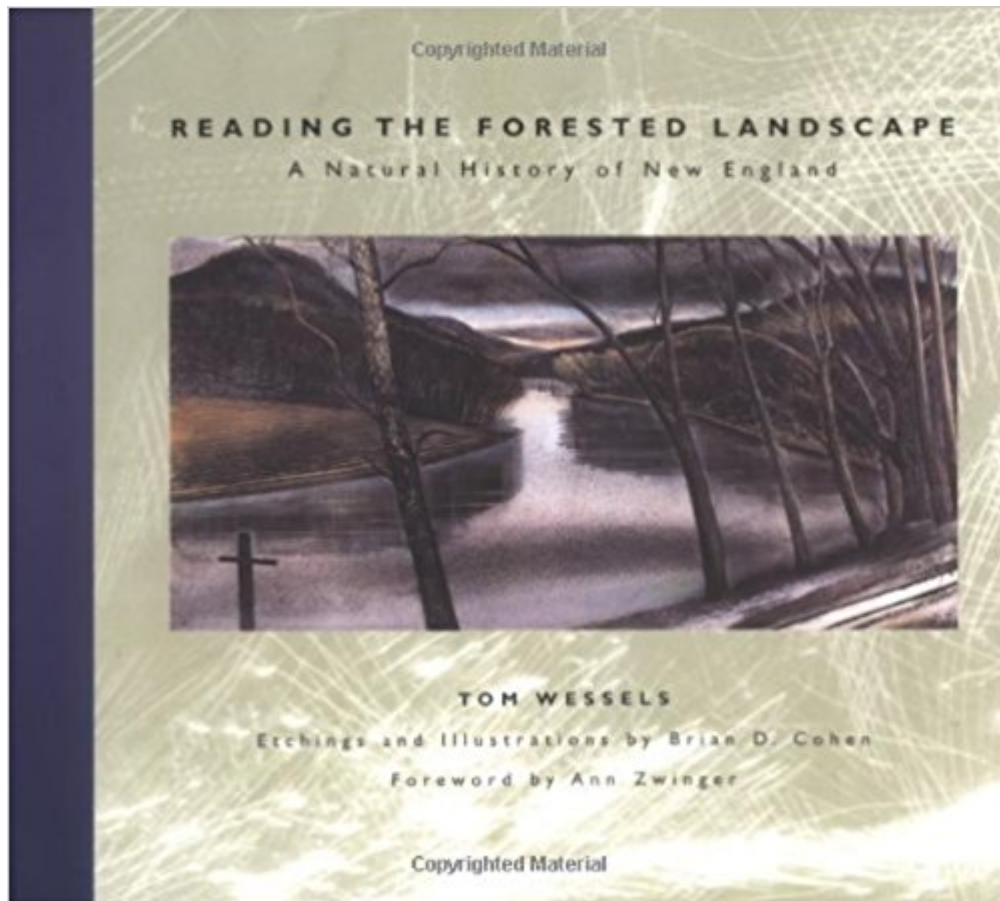




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# **Reading The Forested Landscape: A Natural History Of New England**



## Synopsis

Landscape is much more than scenery to be observed or even terrain to be traveled, as this fascinating and many-layered book vividly shows us. Etched into the land is the history of how we have inhabited it, the storms and fires that have shaped it, and its response to these and other changes. An intrepid sleuth and articulate tutor, Wessels teaches us to read a landscape the way we might solve a mystery. What exactly is the meaning of all those stone walls in the middle of the forest? Why do beech and birch trees have smooth bark when the bark of all other northern species is rough? How do you tell the age of a beaver pond and determine if beavers still live there? Why are pine trees dominant in one patch of forest and maples in another? What happened to the American chestnut? Turn to this book for the answers, and no walk in the woods will ever be the same. 60 black-and-white etchings and illustrations

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“The etchings in Reading the Forested Landscape are fabulous and the text is more entertaining than The Disney Channel.” - Brian Downey, Peterborough, NH

“Tom Wessels evokes ancient logging roads from the weathered scars on trees deep in the New England forest.....he brings alive the intricate, interwoven, and ever-changing story of his region. I feel grateful for this illuminating and beautifully written book.” - John Elder, author of Reading the Mountains of Home

A full and wholly original portrait of New England's forests, tracing their evolution from pre-colonial days to the present through a study of the patterns we see today. Read this book, as many fans have said, and no walk in the woods will ever be the same. Most books and courses on natural history focus on the identification of one small aspect of the complex world outside our doors. We may know how to identify our neighborhood trees but not know why pine are dominant in one place and maple in another; we may notice fungus growing on a beech trunk but not know the devastating impact of blights on our forests over the centuries. Tom Wessels, who has spent more than twenty years interpreting New England's landscape and teaching others to see "the forest for the trees," argues that by coming to a fuller understanding of our home ground, we achieve a greater sense of place. An intrepid sleuth and articulate tutor, Wessels teaches us to read a landscape the way we might solve a mystery. Each chapter addresses a form of forest disturbance common in New England--fire, logging, and blight are examples--and depicts it in an extraordinary, full-page etching. Studying Wessels's descriptions of forest scenes in conjunction with Cohen's visual portraits teaches us to identify disturbance patterns and, in turn, to take our discoveries outside and read the history written in the character of the land.

I'm from New England and I like to get out into the countryside. The woods and fields here are filled with all sorts of history and I expected that this book would help me put some chronology to what I can see. I've gotten only into Chapter Two so far, and it's been a fascinating trip! Even though the title says *A Natural History of New England*, it really focuses on central New England, which is perfect for me. Still, it can be used just about anywhere that people have settled (though some specific points may not apply). The book is more of a forensic guide to what has happened. The reader is presented with simplified, but elegant, drawings of landscape at the beginning of a chapter, and the author then presents questions about what is represented and what may have happened to create the particular landscape. Then, bit by bit, he explains that the type of scarring on this tree may have been caused by fire, or it may have been caused by logging. Now, which one is it? Look at this other clue here. And notice how that apple tree has many branches down low, but then has a strong trunk above them with few branches. What do you suppose that means. Step by step, looking at a myriad of little things, he leads you to the solution of the mystery. It's like Sherlock Holmes taking stock of a crime scene and the possible suspects and witnesses and finally exclaiming, "It's you! Your cattle herding caused this landscape!" (Yes, I know Holmes never actually said the title quote.)

This elegantly laid out book is a delightful survey of forest ecology from the POV of a prof who loves traipsing about Vermont woods near his rural homestead. Though the format is essentially pedantic - each chapter being a tutorial exploration - the author's sense of ease mitigates classroom malaise. Wessels includes a lot of specific information about both plants - particularly trees - and history, including the doings of the pre-colonial Indians, in respect to his environs. A pleasure until the last chapter when the author misguidedly gets into global warming which he doesn't know much about, thus diverting the reader from Walden's Pond reverie to political ideology. Even most Yankees don't understand the ubiquitous stone walls in the middle of the forest, not realizing the whole region had been practically clear-cut (for Portuguese Merino sheep!), or that New England's inland population has only recently equalled what it was in 1840. All those towering oaks are relatively new. (He might also, for example, have added, as was reported on WXCI recently, that the grand total of white-tailed deer in Connecticut in 1896 was twelve.) The writer imparts this and similar fascinating information with great deft. Great gift book for an exurbanite or any lover of nature.

There is so much to learn from this book! I have walked in the woods in Connecticut for 30 years and never understood half of what I saw. As a result of this book I am asking different questions and observing new things. It is written as a series of detective stories. Each chapter begins with an illustration and as the illustrations are discussed, questions arise. This book is packed with knowledge and not preachy. We should teach our children to understand the environment they inhabit from Tom Wessels perspective.

I read the introduction and 2 chapters so far, and now I am noticing more about the forested landscape. I ask more questions and contemplate why the forests I enter are the way they are. There is a wealth of knowledge in this book, can seem a bit dense, but the author explains things well. Author writes in a style that is very personable rather than textbook style. Don't think that you'll read this book in a day. Great book!! I'd recommend this book to people who want to know more about forests and forest history, to people who feel like an "outsider" in forest settings, to people young and old, in school or not!

Having grown up near the area Wessels puts at the center of his study, I suddenly appreciate features of long-known woods and trees (from childhood) that I had often wondered about. The book weaves back and forth between detailed discussion of today's clues and their meaning, and intriguing narrative discussion of the historical events that have left these marks on the landscape.

The etchings and layout make it a beautiful book to hold and browse through, and it begged to be picked up at all free moments until I had read it through. I'm sure I'll return to it, and I'll also return to those woods with new ears for the "tongues in trees" there. Most of its commentary illuminates southern New England also.

Excellent book. The writing was clear and explicit, easy to read and very informative. The pictures are fabulous. This is going to become a treasured part of our personal library. Highly recommend it.

I experience the forest differently after reading this. I take a closer look at hills on the ground, I try to reason out why a tree is growing differently from the rest, I attempt to piece together possible sequences of events that happened over a century to the scene in front of me. I'm probably not very good at it yet, but before reading this book all I had was curiosity. I now have some basic methods to apply and just enough confidence to keep pushing forward, adding a new dimension to my enjoyment of the outdoors. Highly recommended if you love walking through the woods and sometimes wonder what that stump would say if it could talk.

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