

WOOD at WORK 2015

Elegant Strategies for Architecture, City-Building
and Forest Conservation

THE **SANDBOX** BLOG

Why author John Vaillant is speaking at our Wood at Work conference

April Greene — August 28, 2015

This fall, Pilot Projects is pleased to present a first-of-its-kind conference called *Wood at Work: Elegant Strategies for Architecture, City-Building, and Forest Conservation*.

This dynamic and interactive event will link sustainable wood use in an urban context with strategies that make sourcing wood truly beneficial to global forest conservation. The all-day event will be held on October 30 at the Bronx Zoo, preceded the evening before by tours of an urban forest and the Brooklyn Bridge, and cocktails in Manhattan.



For *Wood at Work*, Pilot Projects—in partnership with *Wildlife Conservation Society*, *Natural Areas Conservancy*, and the *Municipal Art Society*—is bringing together influential conservationists, industry innovators, policymakers, architects, and urban planners to discuss the role of wood in urban construction, the global environment, and climate change. Keynote speakers will include renowned architect and historian *Kenneth Frampton*; *Lars Laestadius* of the World Resources Institute; and celebrated forest ecologist *Robin Chazdon*, along with a rich lineup of artists, musicians, and craftsmen. Participants will join in panel discussions and hands-on breakout activities designed for dialogue, networking, and inspiration.

Wood at Work is positioned to radically impact the discourse around wood and forest policy in American cities. It is our goal to accelerate and promote the kinds of solutions that cross-disciplinary collaboration strives for but all too rarely achieves: things like proactive sustainable procurement policies and innovation-fostering building codes that lead to forest-positive outcomes.

Gathering together such a world-class group of participants has been an incredibly joyful and rewarding challenge; the Pilot Projects team spent months brainstorming, researching, and discussing ideas and options. What follows is one story from that process: how our collaborator, forest geographer *Sarah Jane Wilson*, connected with award-winning journalist and author *John Vaillant*, a featured *Wood at Work* speaker.



Sarah Jane Wilson on the West Coast Trail

Always seeking inspiration for her work, Sarah recently hiked the **West Coast Trail**, a 50-mile wilderness trek along the southwestern edge of Vancouver Island in British Columbia (BC), Canada. And inspiring it was: winding through lush virgin rainforest dominated by enormous cedars, firs, and Sitka spruce, the trail also passes through the homeland of the Nuuchahnulth, one of the area's indigenous peoples, whose descendants still harvest from the forest, sea, and intertidal zones.

The mud still wet on her hiking boots, Sarah's first stop after the hike was a visit with John.

John has lived in Vancouver for over 15 years, drawing insights from the stunning West coast landscape for his popular and award-winning books, which examine the fraught yet essential intersection of nature and culture. It was his first book, *The Golden Spruce*, that initially piqued our interest. Factual, informative, and deeply poetic, it tells the history of extraction and environmentalism in Northwestern forests. But John's other two books are equally relevant to *Wood at Work: The Tiger* explores these relationships in a forest in Russia's Far East (a region served by the Wildlife Conservation Society), while *The Jaguar's Children* tells the story of forest-to-city migrants in Latin America, and the loss of culture that goes with them.

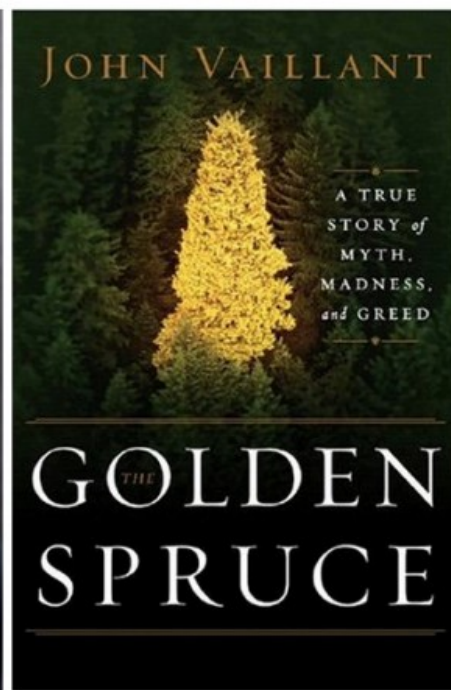
Scott and Sarah had both recommended *The Golden Spruce* to many friends and colleagues, and it was John's poetic yet technical description of a tree that provoked them to "go out on a limb" and ask him to participate in the conference:

From the point of view of physics, all of us are rebels because we spend our lives actively subverting the forces of gravity and entropy, two of the fundamental laws to which all earthly matter must ultimately answer. But the tree is the greatest living symbol of this twofold defiance. ... it could be argued that trees represent aspiration and ambition in their purest forms. Simply by daring to take root and grow, they bellow: "We refute gravity and entropy thus!"

Appropriately, John and Sarah met at **The Naam Café**, a vegetarian institution still thriving from Vancouver's hippie era. The venue is just blocks from John's house, but his choice was about more than convenience: it echoed his sensibilities around history and culture, how the past shapes how we live today, and our connections to place. Noting the context, Sarah mentioned that she spent part of her childhood in an "**off-grid, land-based cooperative**" in Manitoba, Canada.



John Vaillant



"John kind of lit up when he heard that!" she says. "Living near BC's gulf islands, he's observed that hippie children are a rare breed. Mixing creativity and physical endurance, they embody the idealism, practicality, and willfulness of their parents, people who've chosen a life oriented more toward nature and community than material wealth."

"This topic dovetails so beautifully with *Wood at Work*, as one of the challenges we'll discuss is how to create situations for youth to imagine their futures working in ancestral farms and forests as a way to ensure their protection."



An abandoned 'steam donkey' winch along the West Coast Trail, used to haul old growth logs in the turn of the century timber industry

"John is interested in the connections between culture, nature, and natural resource use," Sarah says. "His books examine the tension that arises because people need the environment to survive, but are too darn efficient at exploiting it!, or they start ignoring it from the distance cities create. This leads to conflicts, like those we see around wood extraction and usage. These are exactly the connections we want to tackle at *Wood at Work*, so he's an ideal speaker."

Read more about Wood at Work and [register to attend](#) on the website!

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