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ABOUT THE FILM

Understory is a 40-minute long documentary film that takes us deep into Alaska’s Tongass National Forest, the largest remaining coastal temperate rainforest on the planet. Elsa Sebastian is a young local fisherman who grew up “off-grid” in a remote fishing village surrounded by the vast, ancient forest. When Elsa learns that the United States government is axing environmental protections for nine million acres of the Tongass, she is driven to action; first fixing up an old sailboat, and then setting sail on a 350-mile expedition along the coastal rainforest.

Elsa is joined by Dr. Natalie Dawson, a biologist who has spent decades studying Alaska wildlife, and Mara Menahan, a botanical illustrator. For a month the team documents old-growth trees threatened by logging, visits streams teeming with salmon, bears witness to the dark aftermath of clearcuts, and learns about indigenous cultural connections to the Tongass. As Elsa, Natalie, and Mara directly face the devastating impacts of the timber industry, they struggle to hold onto hope and realize that saving our planet’s last ancient rainforests is more urgent than they could have imagined.

“IT FEELS RARE TO COME ACROSS AN ISSUE WHERE MULTIPLE-GENERATIONS OF FAMILIES IN A RURAL PLACE HAVE BEEN FIGHTING TO PROTECT THEIR HOME.”

COLIN ARISMAN, DIRECTOR
FROM THE FILMMAKERS

Colin Arisman, Director
I first got the idea to make a film about the Tongass when I heard Elsa’s story of ground truthing her home island on the podcast Dirtbag Diaries. Environmental crises are constantly popping up in our feeds, but it feels rare to come across an issue where multiple-generations of families in a rural place have been fighting to protect their home. Elsa was born in the heyday of logging in Southeast Alaska and when she was a kid her family and neighbors in Point Baker were leading the grassroots fight to protect the remaining old-growth rainforest. Understory tells the story of Elsa trying to bring the values of her upbringing into her adult life, and I think that’s the sort of personal journey that many people can relate to.

As a director, I love being part of collaborative storytelling efforts and especially telling stories about long-term grassroots movements. One of our priorities was making sure that we gave the characters opportunities to view the film and provide feedback throughout the process. This is their story, and I hope the sincerity of the film will inspire people to advocate for the Tongass and other public lands.

Elsa Sebastian, Producer
When I started a Tongass ground truthing project with Mara, and Natalie back in 2017, I wasn’t sure what to expect. After a month on the ground bushwhacking through ancient forests, and clearcuts, I started to realize that I’d needed this experience to galvanize my commitment to advocating for the Tongass. Environmental issues can feel staggeringly heavy and grim, and if you don’t confront the scary stuff head on, it’s all too easy to turn away for good.

Conservation work is especially complicated right now. There’s new urgency with climate change and biodiversity loss, but at the same time we’re also starting to figure out how essential it is to acknowledge displacement of indigenous people, and work for reparations. We’re also realizing that the lands that most urgently need protection aren’t necessarily pristine, for example habitat corridors in a heavily logged watershed. With so much to figure out and protect, it’s hard to allow ourselves to pause, but I think it’s times like these when we need to allow ourselves the time and space to create a relationship with the land.

My gratitude for my journey in the Tongass is why I decided to make this film with Colin. I’m not somebody who wants to be on camera, but I felt that this story might be helpful for others who might need a journey to break free from paralysis, and fully engage with the fight for wild places and the environment.

Thanks for watching our film and using this guide to take action for our nation’s rainforest!
Sharing your story can be a transformational experience. Stories enrich our lives and connect individuals and communities across oceans and continents. A powerful documentary film is an accessible and powerful way to tell a story. They inform, empower, change minds and behaviors, inspire calls to action, and improve our lives immensely.

*Understory* is this kind of story. It can be an advocacy tool to galvanize local and national conservation work and provide an entry point for conversation and leadership development. It can be a source of inspiration and jumping off point for your own personal journey and climate work.

If you are still exploring ways to connect and be involved, here are a few more ideas to consider:

- **Deepen background knowledge** on the Tongass and old-growth forests and lead the effort of informing others.

- Use Elsa, Natalie, and Mara’s journey of ground truthing in the Tongass as an *inspiration for your environmental journey* of discovery and connection.

- **Understand** how old-growth forests can be carbon sinks.

- **Work to protect the Tribal lands** of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people who depend on the Tongass for cultural survival and economic livelihood.

- **Get to know your local national forests and public lands.** Ground-truth and spend time experiencing these spaces.

The film and this resource provides organizers, students, and community leaders an accessible and engaging way to invite involvement and plant the seeds for local, national, and international conservation efforts. While the Tongass may not be in your backyard, understanding the work to protect its survival serves as both a model and cautionary tale.

- **Host a screening** with friends, at school, in your faith community, and share this story!

- Take the time to be an informed *climate advocate and Tongass protector*.

- **Use this advocacy resource** to access relevant background on the Tongass including:
  - discussion questions specific to *Understory*.
  - engagement activities inspired by the documentary.
  - curated resources for additional learning to support this effort.

- **Connect with others** and develop strategic approaches for conserving public lands on a national scale.

**Check out this wonderful article to learn more about the making of Understory**
EVENT PLANNING

CHECKLIST FOR ORGANIZING

PRE-WORK

- Watch Understory here in order to clarify your goals for the screening. One of the best ways to engage participants right away is to show a clip or two from the film. As you watch the entire film, keep this in mind choose several scenes to highlight your goals.
- Review this Advocacy Resource. Spend time building background knowledge and learning to guide an engaging and informative event.
- Brainstorm and prioritize a list of local and national community organizations to partner with and to help with outreach. Build a guest list, confirm community partners, and begin compiling relevant local resources.
- What format of event do you want to host?
  - Screening and discussion? (See Before Watching and Post Screening Conversation Prompts)
  - Screening and organizing work? (See Checklist for Organizing)
  - Screening and an engagement activity? (See Engagement Activities)
- Prepare your land acknowledgment and print/make available online any resources you want to distribute. (see suggestion at the end of “Tips for Moderating Conversations”)

LOGISTICS

- Set a time, date, and location including in-person or virtual
  - For an in-person screening, confirm a location that is accessible to all including hearing and sight-impaired participants. Test all AV equipment at least a day in advance of your in-person event.
  - For a virtual screening, decide on platform, facilitator, tools for the screening, and post-screening conversation
  - Social Media Assets to help spread the word.
- Send out an electronic invitation with time, date, location, and description of the film and the post-screening agenda.
- Coordinate with community partners to push out the invitation on their social channels. Make sure everyone is familiar with the film and can prepare and participate fully in the agenda.
TIPS FOR MODERATING CONVERSATIONS

Build a Sense of Community
Watching films together is a meaningful way to bring people together for a shared experience and to build community. *Understory* is an invitation to have a conversation and explore different approaches to organizing under the umbrella of Elsa’s call to action, “I didn’t know what to do. And, at the same time, it felt like my turn to take a stand for the forest.”

Spotlight Hope and Solutions
Natalie, Elsa, and Mara turned to what they knew they could do - ground truthing and sharing their story. While they saw the devastation of industrial clear-cut logging, they are also using it to bear witness for change. This paradigm is important to reinforce - identify the avenues for change that make sense for you and your community.

Share Your Passion
As a moderator, and as an organizer, your passion and energy for the Tongass, your local public lands or national forests, and for the survival of our planet will set the tone for the event. Be transparent and explicit and share your vision.

Create a Space for Multiple Perspectives
There are many points of view concerning the conservation and regulation of public lands and the use of public lands for the economy. It’s essential to bring openness and curiosity to these nuanced and complicated conversations.

For example, fishermen, loggers, and environmental activists may define “conservation” differently, while many who practice low waste lifestyles may not feel that the word “conservation” applies to them at all. Others hold differing opinions about the relative importance of the economic benefits of using natural resources - including the viability of jobs in those sectors - versus the concerns related to environmental protection.

If your screening event includes a conversation on *Understory* and includes diverse interests and backgrounds, it may be important to be explicit and set parameters for the conversation. This can include a reminder about not interrupting, asking for clarification rather than attacking a point of view, listening actively, practicing the habit of stepping back, if you are one to speak up readily, or stepping up if you are one to hang back and let others lead the conversation.

Be Aware of Climate Fatigue
This is real and it is hard. For younger activists, it is particularly important to acknowledge the toll this work can take and make an effort to promote self-care and create opportunities for reflection, celebration, and time for oneself. When you find yourself feeling that your efforts and energy are not making enough of a difference, take some time away, be in nature, and fall in love with our planet again.
BEFORE COLONIZATION, HUMANS’ RELATIONSHIP TO THE RAINFOREST WAS PROFOUNDLY DIFFERENT. MOST OF WHAT IS NOW KNOWN AS THE TONGASS IS TLINGIT ANI, AND TO THE SOUTH ARE THE HOMELANDS OF THE HAIDA AND TSIMSHIAN PEOPLE.”

ELSA SEBASTIAN, UNDERSTORY
STRENGTHENING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

We know you have a lot to contribute and share. You may already know a lot about the Tongass or you may be building your background knowledge and want to know more. No matter how you come to this topic, or where you may live in the world, the Understory team wanted to make sure you had what you needed to guide your screening and organizing event.

Here are a handful of topics they prioritized and resources they turn to in their conservation and organizing work.

"THE TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST IS A COASTAL TEMPERATE RAINFOREST, AND COASTAL TEMPERATE RAINFORESTS HAVE MORE BIOMASS, MORE VEGETATION, MORE LIFE THAN ANY OTHER KIND OF FOREST ON THE PLANET. THERE’S JUST SO MUCH LIFE, AND, AS A BIOLOGIST, THAT’S INCREDIBLE."

NATALIE DAWSON, UNDERSTORY
Understory was filmed in the Tongass National Forest, which at 17-million acres is the largest temperate rainforest in the world. The Tongass is cradled between the open expanse of the Pacific Ocean and the highest coastal mountain range in the world. The forest covers over 1,000 islands and the mainland foothills of the Coast Range. This region is rich in wildlife, all five species of salmon spawn in the Tongass, and it is home to higher densities of brown bears, black bears, and bald eagles than any place in the world.

Coastal temperate rainforests are globally rare, about half of them are found on the northwest coast of North America.

Resources to learn more about the Tongass:

- The Ecological Atlas of Southeast Alaska is an incredible visual resource created by Audubon Alaska. The atlas shares ecology, human uses, and conservation priorities for Southeast Alaska.

- The Nature of Southeast Alaska is an entertaining field guide to Southeast Alaska sharing some of the most captivating natural histories of the region.
PEOPLE OF THE TONGASS

The forests that make up the Tongass are part of the traditional homeland of the Tlingit and Haida people. In *Understory*, Marina Anderson, a Tlingit and Haida woman who lives in the village of Kasaan, describes the indigenous relationship with cedar.

"CEDAR IS PART OF OUR IDENTITY, IT’S PART OF WHO WE ARE. THIS HOUSE IS MADE OUT OF RED CEDAR, OUR CANOES ARE MADE OUT OF CEDAR, OUR TOTEM POLES ARE MADE OUT OF CEDAR."

*MARINA ANDERSON, UNDERSTORY*

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**Resources to learn more about indigenous people of the Tongass:**

- Learn more about the indigenous people of this region from the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida.
- Explore the traditional relationship to cedar through this story map, which describes cultural uses of trees, and new access challenges.
- *Understory* Director, Colin Arisman made a short video about Tlingit leader Joel Jackson’s efforts to protect the Tongass. Watch here.
STATEHOOD AND THE ECONOMY OF LOGGING IN SOUTHEAST ALASKA

Russian explorers were drawn to Southeast Alaska in the 1700s by the abundance of sea-otters, eventually establishing a few colonial outposts in Southeast Alaska. Despite their dubious claims, the Russians “sold” Alaska—including the unceded land of the Tlingit and Haida people—to the United States in 1867.

Alaska remained a colonial territory of the United States for nearly 100 years, but with statehood pending in the 40s and 50s, there was increasing pressure to prove that Alaska had viable industries. Most Alaskans were working seasonally, as fishermen and trappers, and their lifestyles were far from conventional.

The federal government, in response, wanted to see the “Last Frontier” become more civilized through the creation of stable year-round economies. At the top of the list was logging. The Alaskan timber industry at this time was a collection of small-scale, family-owned sawmills, far from the scale imagined by political leaders at the time. To spur big industry, the US government offered two multinational companies 50-year contracts with the promise of an immense supply of timber. By the time Alaska became a state in 1959, two huge pulp mills were operating in the Tongass, and the US Forest Service was facilitating booming business by preparing timber sales and subsidizing road building.

In the early days of statehood, the timber industry took advantage of minimal oversight and regulations; logging right up to the edge of streams, dragging whole logs through streambeds, and even cutting trees outside of planned timber sale units. The U.S. Forest Service worked closely with the pulp mills to ensure that they had a steady supply of timber, and the roads necessary to access timber. In such a rugged and wild region, the work of the U.S. Forest Service was costly, and that cost was borne by taxpayers.

In the early 1990s, the pulp mills went out of business, but the subsidies for logging in the Tongass have continued to the present day. A non-partisan watchdog group, Taxpayers for Common Sense, found that in the last 40 years of timber harvest, the US Forest Service has lost approximately $1.7 billion (on average: $44 million per year).

“In the early 1950s, it started costing Americans a lot of money to take trees off this forest. When these pulp contracts started, that’s when we also started to see the large government subsidies.”

NATALIE DAWSON, UNDERSTORY
The USFS spends years selecting suitable timber stands, thinning them when necessary, analyzing the environmental effects of various harvest options, calculating the sale’s financial efficiency, advertising the sale, and evaluating bids from private logging companies. For some sales, the USFS also pays to construct or reconstruct roads to facilitate the harvest of the chosen timber stands. Covering road-building costs improves the economics of a timber sale for logging companies, but also significantly increases the total costs of the USFS timber program.”

TAXPAYERS FOR COMMON SENSE (2019)

Resources to learn more about logging in Southeast Alaska:

Taxpayers for Common Sense is a nonpartisan budget watchdog. Read their 2020 report on taxpayer-subsidized logging of the Tongass here.

It’s hard to understand the motivations of the US Forest Service. USFS Tongass whistleblower, Bill Shoaf, exposes the abuses of the US Forest Service in his book, The Taking of the Tongass.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE TONGASS

Trees are pulling massive amounts of carbon from the air every day; and the older and bigger a tree is, the more carbon it holds. In a typical old-growth forest, fifty percent of the carbon is held by the largest one percent of trees. This is why preserving old-growth forests will have a more profound impact on slowing climate change than planting new trees. Allowing older and middle-aged forests intact because of their superior carbon-sequestration is called proforestation. This makes the ancient forest of the Tongass, with trees as old as 1,000 years, a huge part of the climate solution. Data published in 2021 shows that the Tongass makes up for approximately 44% of the carbon held by national forests in the United States.

There are few mature forests left in the world - in the United States only seven percent of forests are older than 100 years - but these forests play an outsized role in mitigating climate change.

Our nation’s public lands are a huge part of our climate solution. In this national forest, because it’s a coastal temperate rainforest, there’s more biomass, more living matter, more carbon than any other ecosystem on the planet. We are literally standing in one of the largest carbon reserves in the world.”

NATALIE DAWSON, UNDERSTORY
Soon after taking office, the Biden Administration announced that they would work with federal agencies to restore the Roadless Rule protections for the Tongass National Forest. The Biden Administration promised that in addition to restoring these 20-year-old Roadless protections, they’d also bring an end to all clear-cut logging of old-growth in the Tongass.

These conservation efforts are part of the administration’s work to mitigate climate change by protecting 30% of the land and 30% of the ocean by 2030. 30x30 is a necessary action to mitigate the climate crisis and address cascading biodiversity losses. The principles for 30x30 are laid out in the Biden Admin’s America the Beautiful report, and include commitments to honoring tribal sovereignty, and promoting local economies.

“\nFor so many climate solutions, we have to do things, we have to change the way we live. In this case, all we have to do is STOP and let these ancient forests do what they’ve done for this planet for thousands of years.”

ELSA SEBASTIAN, UNDERSTORY

Resources to learn more about climate change in the Tongass:

Check out this illuminating article from Wired magazine, about how ancient trees are The Greatest Climate-Protecting Technology Ever Devised.

New research from the Wild Heritage project shows that the Tongass holds 44% of the carbon in the US National Forest System.

Published research explains how proforestation is an immediate and cost-effective climate solution.

WARM-UP: BEFORE WATCHING UNDERSTORY

Create community by leading a warm-up exercise before screening the film. Try these:

- Reflect on a time in your life when you took a stand about something you cared about or were passionate to protect?
- What do you do when you want to change something in society but the issue feels too big? Where do you turn?
- Have you visited a national forest? What do you remember about this experience?
- What do you think are the purposes for national forests and public lands?
WATCH

CHECKLIST FOR ORGANIZING

For organizing a screening event at a high school, college/university, community group, or workplace settings:

CLICK HERE TO ACCESS THE FILM

Here are some ideas for bringing people together to watch the film and share why it is important:

WATCH & SHARE

- HOST A HOUSE PARTY and invite friends and family
- PARTNER WITH LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS that share a common mission
- CONNECT WITH LOCAL SCHOOLS and university groups to screen the film in classrooms
- ASK YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY to host a screening
- USE SOCIAL MEDIA to tell your network about the film and what it means to you
POST-SCREENING CONVERSATION

Take a few moments after the film screening for individuals to collect their thoughts before transitioning to a conversation.

Here are some questions to begin:

Choose one word to describe their response to Understory. This is often a respectful and gentle way to begin a conversation.

In the film we meet Marina Anderson, a young Haida and Tlingit leader, who is working to heal and restore her ancestral land. She shares, “There’s a time when the less greedy you are, the more wealthy you are. The less that you can take and the more that you can give, the more wealthy you are. Those are our traditional values that are coming back into play.”
  • Discuss Marina’s perspective on wealth. Do you share her view? Why or why not?

Mara shares an observation of Elsa, “She’s not your average tree-hugger.”
  • What did you observe were Elsa’s motivations and passions for this work? Was her quest successful?
  • What motivates you in your organizing and advocacy work?
  • What skills do you bring to that table?
  • What would you like to pursue to be a more effective organizer and/or advocate?

Representative Don Young (R-Alaska) is the longest-serving member of Congress and the only representative from Alaska. In Understory we hear him share this statement made on the floor of the House:

We’ve lost fifteen-thousand jobs in Southeast Alaska--high-paying jobs--because of the so-called environmental movement. That does not make sense. That does not make sense for America. This [old-growth timber] is a renewable resource that should be utilized and managed correctly. If I was doing it myself, I’d cut the old-growth timber, it’s dying anyway.

  • If you were to write a letter to Representative Young in response to his statement, what would you want to say?
  • Can Understory be a tool to respond to Representative Young? What would you want to emphasize?
LOCAL AND NATIONAL ACTIONS

Protecting the Tongass remains a dynamic political, economic, and environmental issue. There is a lot at stake in this region of Alaska.

For individuals and groups seeking to engage in advocacy work around the Tongass, here are some ways to get engaged:

1. PARTICIPATE IN U.S. FOREST SERVICE PUBLIC PROCESS TO RESTORE ROADLESS RULE PROTECTIONS FOR THE TONGASS

The Biden Administration is working to reverse this decision and restore Roadless Rule protections for the Tongass. Although the current administration understands the importance of protecting old-growth rainforests, future administrations might try to overturn the Roadless Rule once again.

On November 23rd, the US Forest Service opened a 60-day public comment period, giving citizens across the United States the opportunity to weigh in on their efforts to restore Roadless Rule protections for the Tongass.

Political leaders need to see that people across the nation want to see the end to clearcut logging in the Tongass, and submitting a public comment in support of reinstating Roadless Rule protections for the Tongass is one of the best ways to make your voice heard.

To submit a public comment during the 60-day public comment period, visit the Last Stands website. Comments must be submitted by January 24th, 2022.

Filling out a form is a good first step, but the US Forest Service will more strongly weigh comments that are written by individuals. Learn how to submit a unique public comment on the Last Stands website.
2 BECOME A MEMBER OF THE ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE PROTECTING THE TONGASS

AUDUBON ALASKA
Audubon Alaska’s mission is to conserve natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats, for the benefit of present and future generations.

Audubon AK website
@audubonalaska

THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY
The Wilderness Society is committed to the idea that wilderness and all public lands can bring people and communities together and that everyone should share equitably in their benefits.

TWS website
@wildernesssociety

SOUTHEAST ALASKA CONSERVATION COUNCIL
The Southeast Alaska Conservation Council is a homegrown conservation group of Southeast Alaskans fiercely fighting to protect the Tongass. SEACC keeps members across the country informed whenever there are opportunities to speak up for the Tongass.

SEACC website
@southeast_ak_wild

3 ADVOCATE FOR THE ROADLESS RULE CONSERVATION ACT

There are nearly 60-million acres of “roadless” forests across the United States, and these intact forests offer unparalleled backcountry experiences, hunting, fishing, and carbon sequestration. The Roadless Rule should be made law, permanently protecting the Tongass and all other undeveloped national forests from the construction of new logging roads. Visit the website of your senator and representative, and ask them to support the Roadless Rule Conservation Act.

Read more about the Roadless Area Conservation Act here!

4 VOICE FOR THE TONGASS

Using Social Media: The Tongass National Forest is public land, and it is up to all of us to speak for its future. Sharing a social media post about the Tongass, with your reflections on the role of public lands in addressing climate change can help build a powerful narrative about the importance of this place. You can make your post extra impactful by tagging the US Forest Service and your elected officials.

You can use photos of the Tongass from the Understory team, make sure to credit photos appropriately.

TO STAY CURRENT, THE UNDERSTORY WEBSITE IS THE BEST PLACE TO GO.
PERSONAL WAYS TO BUILD YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE TONGASS

Building Local Economy
The commercial fishing and tourism industries are both dependent on the Tongass National Forest remaining intact and healthy. Salmon fishermen need the Tongass to continue to provide salmon habitat, and tourism businesses rely on scenic beauty and intact populations of wildlife. Locally, people in these industries feel that the US Forest Service has overlooked these connections to the Tongass, instead of focusing job creation efforts exclusively in support of the timber industry, which is less than 1% of the local economy.

Supporting Fisheries
You can support salmon habitat and commercial fishing jobs in the Tongass region by buying fish directly from fishermen, or companies like Sitka Salmon Shares. Sitka Salmon Shares is an online seafood market delivering premium wild Alaska seafood to thousands of home cooks across the country. Their model supports a fleet of fishermen-owners, small-boat Alaska fishermen, and coastal fishing communities. Sitka Salmon Shares invests 1% of the Company’s gross revenue every year in fisheries conservation, habitat protection, and coastal community resilience efforts in Alaska, as well as efforts to ensure the vitality of small-scale fishing fleets and build a values-based seafood movement in the United States. Sitka Salmon Shares donated money to make Understory.

Visit the Tongass
Visiting the Tongass is a way to build your own relationship with this incredible place. As Natalie says in Understory, you don’t need to see something to care about it, but if you have the ability, you can consider planning a trip to Southeast Alaska that will allow you opportunities to connect with the land and support regenerative tourism.

Check out Visit Southeast Alaska, a regenerative tourism initiative promoting meaningful and responsible visitor experiences in communities across the region of Southeast Alaska. Their locally-led approach highlights tourism opportunities that can protect, and benefit communities, cultures and ecosystems.
GROUND TRUTHING
CONNECT AND ADVOCATE FOR THE LAND

In the film Understory, three women set sail to circumnavigate and ground-truth the largest most threatened island in Southeast Alaska. Elsa Sebastian, a local fisherman, Mara Menahan, a scientific illustrator, and Natalie Dawson, a field biologist. They want to immerse themselves in the Tongass to better understand how logging has impacted ecosystems and find ways to speak for this remote rainforest. Outside of the film, Mara, Elsa, and Natalie have been ground truthing together for years, and their experiences together have inspired writing, art, public speaking, podcasts, and now film.

The women of Understory have embraced the practice of ground truthing as a way to deepen their relationship with the Tongass.

Here are some of their beliefs and values about ground truthing:

- **Ground truthing** is an effort to bear witness to and document places that are threatened by extractive industries and mismanagement.

- **Bearing witness** is a personal act, but it’s also political. The worst abuse of the land will occur in places that are unseen by the general public; whether they are remote, or simply marginalized.

- The **observations** made during ground truthing can be used to draw attention to flaws in development plans, or unmeasured effects of extractive industry. Observations can also clarify what stands to be lost if wildlands are not stewarded appropriately.

- **Culture** is important to the management of public lands, and ground truthing is a meaningful seed experience for creating stories and artwork.

“Ground truthing is a way of inhabiting the world. It is a way of moving with attention, using your five senses as a guide and collecting data with your body. Ground truthing makes me feel fully alive. It is different from the scientific method of measuring and documenting the world, one that cannot fit into the neat boxes of any academic discipline.”

MARA MENAHAN, ARTIST STATEMENT

“Ground truthing is this really incredible way to just understand a landscape by being in it until you notice things that you wouldn’t otherwise notice. And you can also talk about what it actually means to be in a clearcut versus an old-growth forest because you’ve walked through those two different places.”

NATALIE DAWSON, UNDERSTORY
How Can You Ground Truth?

Ground truthing doesn’t have to be a major journey, if there’s a small timber sale or development project near your home you could spend a day transecting it and taking notes and photos about what you see; trying to wrap your head around and engage your heart with what might be lost. You can look for opportunities to share your experience through a public process, or by sharing photos and observations with friends. Contributing your experience of a place to the political conversation is a valuable thing.

Elsa Sebastian

Can Ground Truthing Halt an Extractive Project?

Under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the federal government is legally mandated to identify all potential environmental impacts from a proposed development project. In the case of logging in the Tongass, the U.S. Forest Service is the agency in charge of identifying environmental impacts. If they fail to account for an environmental impact, then this claim can be included in a legal challenge.

Any citizen of the United States has the right to be part of the NEPA process and contribute information.
CREATING BOTANICAL ART

Note: If available, have on-hand art materials for your group to access for an exercise in observation and attention.

Mara, a botanical artist at the United States Botanic Garden in Washington D.C. explains her approach to the drawings she created during the filming of *Understory*.

“A piece of surveying tape wrapped around a cedar tree. A float from a fishing net drifting in the water with seaweed. I am searching for the common denominator, what holds these things in common: the landscape, the tides, the forest, the color blue. All of the objects come from the same place and are made up of essentially the same things: water, carbohydrate chains, dust. As I painted and held each thing in my hand, those boundaries between animal, mineral, plant and human began to break down. We share colors, space, and time with everything else on this planet, our shared home.

As a portrait of a particular time and place, I am also interested in how the meaning of these paintings will change with time. How some of these objects may be eclipsed by others. How when we lose a species from an island or this planet, we lose a particular shade of pink or blue.

Something I want to share with students is the capacity to find and celebrate beauty in places where our dominant culture might overlook it. I want to push back against the myth that “beauty” and “nature” is only found in far flung places, National Parks etc., and empower students to find it on their streets, in their homes, neighborhoods, schools and celebrate it fiercely. And also to allow this process to have joy since inhabiting the world through your five senses is a way of feeling fully alive.”
AN EXERCISE IN WONDER

Is there a place, a building, a street, a neighborhood, a home that you find beautiful in an unconventional way? Worthy of our attention? Using one of your five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch), document what you find and share that through a drawing, a voice recording, a food dish, a sculpture. Make us feel the wonder, joy, or pleasure you get from being in this place.

CREATING A PLACE PORTRAIT

Can you tell a story of a place with objects?

Identify a place of interest that can be physically visited, organize objects they find this place by color, and then take a photograph. Here are some additional process questions to ask:

- This portrait has a timestamp and this place will change with time. Discuss the ways this landscape may change.
- Is this a place threatened by gentrification, sea-level rise, wildfire, development, urbanization, pollution, etc?
- What objects might disappear with time? What things might become more prevalent?

After discussing, find a comfortable place and recreate your photograph in whatever form you find meaningful be it abstract drawing, written text, poem, etc.