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The Witness Tree project: A portfolio

Carolyn Monastra

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Witness Tree is a photography project about the effects of climate change around the world. From the melting ice of Antarctica to the wildfires of Australia to the encroaching deserts of Inner Mongolia, I am drawn to precious and precarious places that mark the shifting boundaries between nature and the effects of our not-so-natural disasters. I want to show the eerie, discordant landscapes in our stormy, drying world. I want to capture this life before it goes away and because I want it to live.

My work is driven by the emerging dialogue between people who are rooted to their lands but are (sometimes) innocently uprooted from them. Although many of the landscapes I visited were beautiful, the stories were not: I heard tales of loss of life, property, and valuable natural and cultural resources. I spoke with a couple in New Orleans after losing their home to a hurricane for a third time. A homeowner in Nantucket expressed his concerns about how rapidly the ocean was creeping up the beach toward the home he's owned for 46 years. A woman in the Canadian Arctic showed me a place where permafrost had made a bridge collapse. The portfolio in this journal draws from photographs I have made in and near US national parks, national forests, and other public lands. Although most of the photos are of ostensibly "natural" subjects, the places I show are of great cultural significance to many Americans (as well as visitors from elsewhere). Some of these photos are being published for the first time.

It has been a bittersweet journey, but many of the people I met have inspired me. I believe it is possible for our collective environmental efforts to have an impact in creating healthier, more sustainable communities. Through presentations, exhibitions, and audience engagement events of The Witness Tree, I hope to translate a general awareness about climate change into a concern and an action to reduce its effects on our world. To see more work from this global project, please visit www.TheWitnessTree.org.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

A native of Cleveland, Ohio, Carolyn Monastra's earliest work with photography involved taking pictures of people on the street and imagining their stories. This attraction to story and image fueled her education: she received a BA in English Literature from Fordham University and an MFA in photography from the Yale School of Art. For the past 20 years her work has focused on creating and discovering mystery in the natural world. Artist residencies at The Djerassi Foundation, Blue Mountain Center, and the Saltonstall Foundation have given her inspirational environments in which to create her work.

After photographing icebergs during a 2009 residency at the Skaftfell Visual Arts Center in Iceland, Monastra conceived the idea for The Witness Tree, to chronicle what she sees as the most important story unfolding across our planet—a project to honor and preserve places and people affected by climate change. Since 2010, she has traveled to over 19 US states, 18 countries, and every continent researching and photographing for this series. In 2012, she was selected by The Climate Reality Project to become one of their Climate Leaders. Monastra's awards include a production grant from the Puffin Foundation, a multimedia fellowship from BRIC (formerly Brooklyn Information and Culture), and residencies at Ucross, Blue Mountain Center, and Djerassi Foundation, among others. In addition to being in the prestigious Marguiles Collection in Miami, her work is also in private collections in the United States, Australia, and England. Monastra's photos have been exhibited in venues across the United States, and in China, Northern Ireland, Italy, and England. She currently lives in Brooklyn, New York. To see other projects, including Monastra's current conceptual climate project, *Divergence of Birds*, please visit www.CarolynMonastra.com and follow her on Instagram [@carolyn_monastra](https://www.instagram.com/carolyn_monastra), Facebook [@CarolynMonastraArt](https://www.facebook.com/CarolynMonastraArt), and Twitter [@carolynmonastra](https://twitter.com/carolynmonastra). All images © Carolyn Monastra; please contact the artist if you would like to use these or other images from this climate project in your own publications.



MIDDLE OF THE ROAD AFTER THE CHINN WILDFIRE, NEAR WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, MONTANA, 2017

Driving north after a visit to Yellowstone National Park, there was the faint smell of fire in the air. I thought at first that it was just the smell of campfire lingering on my clothes, but as soon as I came upon this stretch of road, it was clear what the culprit was. Although 7,000 acres were damaged, there were no deaths. Yellowstone was unaffected by this fire, but in June 2022, the park was impacted by unprecedented flooding due to heavy rains and warmer temperatures that rapidly melted the snowpack. More than 10,000 visitors had to be evacuated and parts of the park remained closed for long periods.



COASTAL MANGROVES DAMAGED BY STORMS, HURRICANES AND SEA LEVEL RISE, EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK, FLORIDA, 2013

Climate change often delivers a “one-two punch.” Several of the photos from this project could be placed in at least two of the themed papers in this issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum*. Sea level rise is causing die-off of white and black mangroves in interior sections of the Everglades, and hurricanes and storm surges fueled by climate change have damaged the red mangroves that line the coast.



LOGEPOLE PINES KILLED BY BARK BEETLE INFESTATION, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK, COLORADO, 2017

Over 4 million acres of lodgepole pines have been decimated in the Colorado Rockies by the bark beetle infestation and more than 60 million acres of forest in the US and Canada have been affected to varying degrees. Years of drought and warming winters have helped set the stage for this epidemic for which there is no known widespread treatment; only localized spraying with chemicals can save some trees.



DEAD YUCCA PLANTS, RED ROCK NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA, NEVADA, 2016

Just 15 miles from Las Vegas, Red Rock Canyon was deemed a National Conservation Area in 1990. This status comes with funding to maintain and protect it. Like many areas of the Southwest, Red Rock Canyon is experiencing higher temperatures and greater periods of drought. Other threats besides climate change are encroaching on Red Rock: If Clark County commissioners change nearby zoning restrictions, it could lead the way for increased development in the area, further threatening the habitat of the endangered desert tortoise (the official state reptile), other native wildlife, and some 600 species of plants.



TREES KILLED BY RECENT WILDFIRE, TAHOE NATIONAL FOREST, CALIFORNIA, 2014

Situated northwest of Lake Tahoe, this forest is a popular destination for biking, hiking, fishing, and birding. With increasing temperatures and the ongoing drought in California, this area has had its share of wildfires. These trees were likely killed in a fire from 2013 or 2014. As of mid-September 2022, the Mosquito Fire had already burned nearly 70,000 acres, forcing evacuations of neighboring communities in Placer and El Dorado counties. A 2021 Forest Resilience Bond funded by multiple public and private agencies will provide \$25 million to restore and reduce wildfire risk and enhance water quality and supply in the Sierra Nevada region.



MARK OF BURNED TREE SURROUNDED BY NEW GRASS, APACHE-SITGREAVES NATIONAL FOREST, ARIZONA, 2011

Accidentally started by campers, the Wallow Fire burned for over six weeks before it could be contained destroying over 500,000 acres (200,000 hectares). Grass-seed pods, dropped from helicopters soon after the fire ended, helped to quickly bring some new growth to the area, but it will take decades for areas with severe burn to recover.



BONES OF SMALL ANIMAL KILLED BY WILDFIRE, APACHE-SITGREAVES NATIONAL FOREST, ARIZONA, 2011

The Wallow Fire was the largest wildfire in recorded Arizona history, and is estimated to have cost over \$100 million. Thankfully no humans were killed, but there is no way of counting how many animals could not outrun or escape the destructive blaze.



SALAMANDER GLACIER, GLACIER NATIONAL PARK, MONTANA, 2017

Of the 150 glaciers that existed in the park when it was founded 100 years ago, only 25 remain, and those glaciers are expected to disappear by 2100, if not earlier. With climate change, trees and other vegetation in the park may migrate to higher elevations, forcing animals to follow, but some species may not be able to survive this change to a new environment.



INTAKE TOWERS OF HOOVER DAM AT LAKE MEAD NATIONAL RECREATION AREA, ARIZONA-NEVADA BORDER, 2016

The light-colored band of rock is testament to the declining water levels in the Lake Mead reservoir (created by the impoundment of the Colorado River), which supplies water for 40 million people in seven states. The water was already at a low level in 2016 when this photo was taken. In 2022, as the Southwest stretches into its second decade of drought, the water level hit a dangerously low level for the hydroelectric plant to operate, just 1,041 feet above sea level. A recent report by NASA (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration) noted that the reservoir last reached its full capacity of 9.3 million gallons of water and an elevation of 1,220 feet in 1999.



**PLANTING A SEEDLING AS PART OF A FORCE MAJEURE PROJECT,
SAGEHEN CREEK FIELD STATION, SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA, 2014**

The Center for the Study of Force Majeure was created in 2007 by American land artists Helen Harrison and Newton Harrison in response to global warming. Their project at Sagehen, on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, planted seedlings at various altitudes to see which will survive our changing climatic conditions. The project is in the Sagehen Experimental Forest, which is managed by several partners: the University of California, Tahoe National Forest, and the US Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Research Station. Projects such as this point the way to collaborations being an essential component of community-based climate solutions.



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On the cover of this issue

Climate change creates conditions conducive to larger, more frequent fires, particularly in the American West. As a result, historic structures and artifacts are at greater risk of fire damage. The Bent's Fort Fire started on the morning of April 12, 2022. Approximately 85% of the national historic site's 800 acres burned. Thanks to the efforts of fire crews, the reconstructed adobe fort was undamaged. | [NATIONAL PARK SERVICE](#)