Opinion
EarthBeat



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John R. Platt

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Editor's Note: This story originally appeared in The Revelator and is part of Covering Climate Now, a global journalism collaboration strengthening coverage of the climate story.

Everywhere I go this holiday season, I hear the same refrain: People are desperate for something to inspire them.

That's why I've spent the past several weeks with my head in a series of books, all offering insight into the natural world and how to protect it.

Here are 20 environmental books published in 2024 for readers of all ages and experience. They offer vision, knowledge, and a sense of wonder — necessary to help us build a better planet no matter who's in the White House in the year to come.

You'll find my capsule reviews below, along with the books' official descriptions. The links for each title go to the official publishers' pages, but you should also be able to find any of these books through your local booksellers or libraries.

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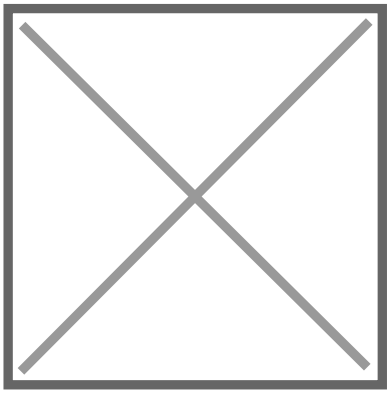
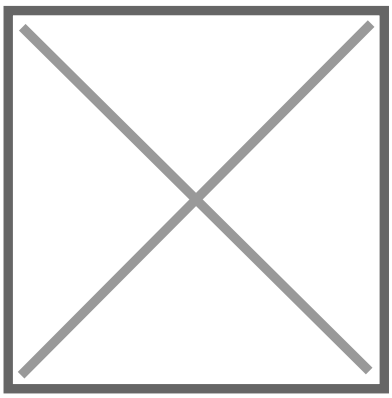


A Natural History of Empty Lots: Field Notes From Urban Edgelands, Back Alleys, and Other Wild Places by Christopher Brown

Quite possibly the best ecology book I've ever read. An eye-opening memoir that has me looking for life — and often finding it — amidst the broken places in my suburban neighborhood.

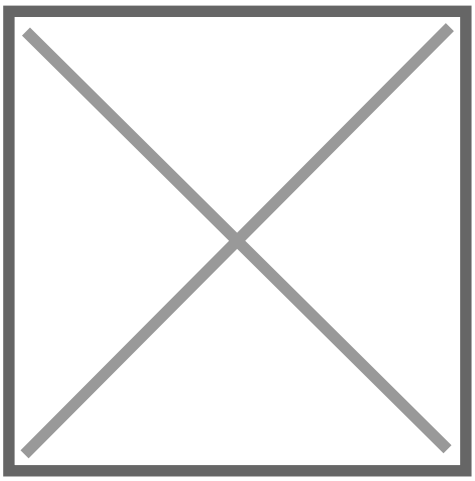
From the publisher: "During the real estate crash of the late 2000s, Christopher Brown purchased an empty lot in an industrial section of Austin, Texas. The property — abandoned and full of litter and debris — was an unlikely site for a home. Brown had become fascinated with these empty lots around Austin, so-called "ruined" spaces once used for agriculture and industry awaiting their redevelopment. He discovered them to be teeming with natural activity and embarked on a 20-year project to live in and document such spaces. There, in our most damaged landscapes, he witnessed the remarkable resilience of wild nature, and how we can heal ourselves by healing the Earth."



Vanishing Treasures: A Bestiary of Extraordinary Endangered Creatures by Katherine Rundell

A marvelous, melancholy, celebratory book from an internationally bestselling author. Rundell writes brief, moving essays about nearly two dozen imperiled species (or groups of species), with each chapter digging deep into literature (historic, cultural, and scientific) to present a portrait of why these animals are worth saving. She only has personal experience with a couple of these species, but she's met a pangolin, which is more than most of us can say.

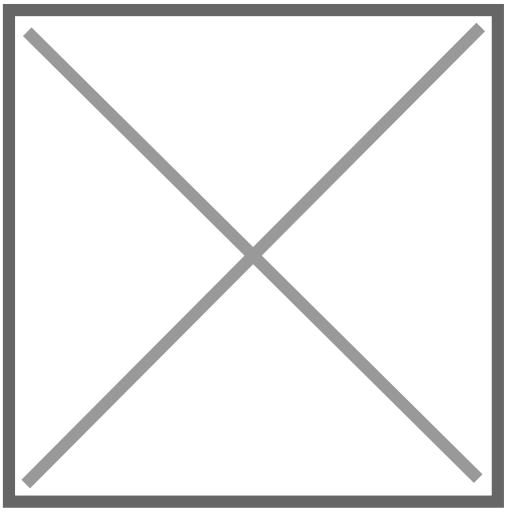
"This urgent, inspiring book of essays dedicated to 23 unusual and underappreciated creatures is a clarion call insisting that we look at the world around us with new eyes — to see the magic of the animals we live among, their unknown histories and capabilities, and above all how lucky we are to tread the same ground as such vanishing treasures."



H Is for Hope: Climate Change from A to Z by Elizabeth Kolbert

Kolbert (best known from The New Yorker and her book The Sixth Extinction) is among our most important and insightful climate journalists. Here she speak to a younger audience in a way that's sure to click with the next generation.

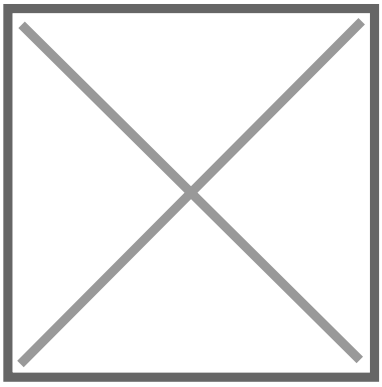
"In H Is for Hope, Elizabeth Kolbert investigates the landscape of climate change — from "A", for Svante Arrhenius, who created the world's first climate model in 1894, to "Z", for the Colorado River Basin, ground zero for climate change in the United States. Along the way she looks at Greta Thunburg's "blah blah blah" speech ("B"), learns to fly an all-electric plane ("E"), experiments with the effects of extreme temperatures on the human body ("T"), and struggles with the deep uncertainty of the future of climate change ("U")."



Tree: Exploring the Arboreal World by Phaidon Editors

This book is a virtual forest. It's a beautiful collection of hundreds of artistic interpretations of trees, executed in every conceivable medium, with mini-essays putting each image in context. This is what coffee table books were invented for.

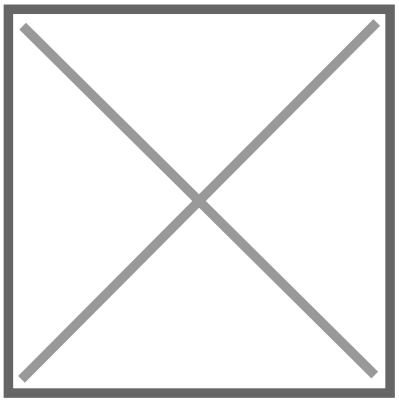
"Spanning continents and cultures, Tree reflects the diversity of its subject, depicting giant sequoias, cherry blossoms, palms, poplars, ginkgoes and other species found across Earth's forest biomes, in a wide-ranging selection of visuals dating from Ancient Greece to the present day. Curated by an international panel of botanists, naturalists, art historians and other experts, the images expand the definition of botanical art, together forming a vibrant, vital homage to the natural world."



You Are Here: Poetry in the Natural World edited by Ada Limón

My favorite poetry book of the year.

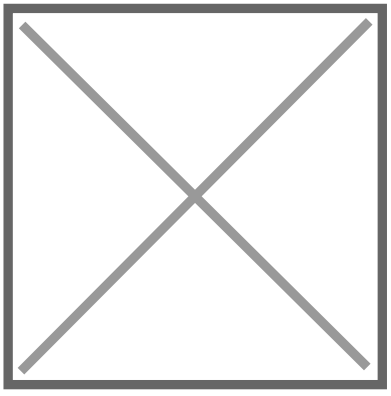
"Published in association with the Library of Congress and edited by the twenty-fourth Poet Laureate of the United States, a singular collection of poems reflecting on our relationship to the natural world by 50 of our most celebrated contemporary writers."



We Will Be Jaguars: A Memoir of My People by Nemonte Nenquimo and Mitch Anderson

A powerful, important book that illuminates global environmental crises and cries out for change. It's gotten a lot of notice (Reese Witherspoon added it to her book club), so I'm hoping it will generate some action.

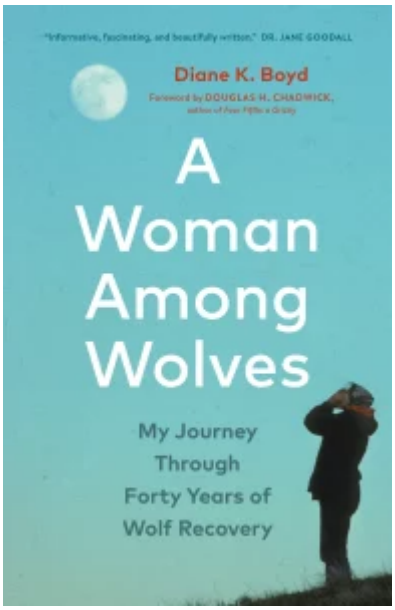
"Born into the Waorani tribe of Ecuador's Amazon rainforest — one of the last to be contacted by missionaries in the 1950s — Nemonte Nenquimo had a singular upbringing. She was taught about plant medicines, foraging, oral storytelling, and shamanism by her elders… Two decades later, Nemonte has emerged as one of the most forceful voices in climate change activism. She has spearheaded the alliance of Indigenous nations across the Upper Amazon and led her people to a landmark victory against Big Oil, protecting over a half million acres of primary rainforest. Her message is as sharp as a spear — honed by her experiences battling loggers, miners, oil companies and missionaries."



We Loved It All by Lydia Millet

A unique memoir from the author of novels like A Children's Bible (as well as a fellow Center for Biological Diversity employee and The Revelator's primary copyeditor). The narrative ebbs and flows like the ocean, sharing waves of memories interspersed with eddies of conservation facts and history. Each aspect illuminates the other, and the result is a book that shines a light on pain and wonder.

"Emerging from Millet's quarter century of wildlife and climate advocacy, We Loved it All marries scenes from her life with moments of nearness to "the others" — the animals and plants with whom we share the earth. Accounts of fears and failures, jobs and friendships, childhood and motherhood are interspersed with exquisite accounts of nonhumans and arresting meditations on the power of story to shape the future.

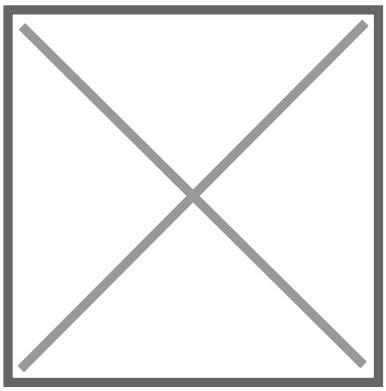


A Woman Among Wolves: My Journey Through Forty Years of Wolf Recovery by Diane K Boyd

An eyewitness to history, Boyd unspools an amazing account that makes me wonder what wolf conservation will look like in another 40 years (not to mention the next four).

"Called the Jane Goodall of wolves, world-renowned wildlife biologist Diane Boyd has spent four decades studying and advocating for wolves in the wilds of Montana near Glacier National Park... She faced down grizzly bears, mountain lions, wolverines — and the occasional trapper — as she stalked her quarry: a handful of wolves that

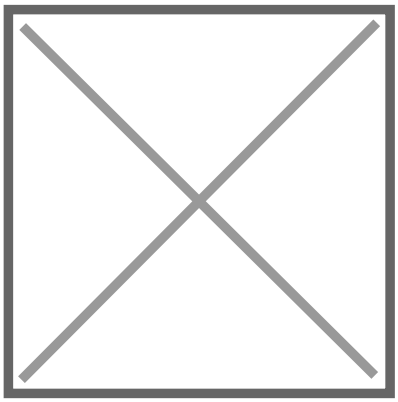
were making their way south from Canada into Montana…. In this captivating book, Boyd takes the reader on a wild ride from the early days of wolf research to the present-day challenges of wolf management across the globe, highlighting her interactions with an apex predator that captured her heart and her undying admiration. Her writing resonates with her indomitable spirit as she explores the intricate balance of human and wolf coexistence."



Amphibious Soul by Craig Foster

A stunning memoir, a testament to the natural world, and a perfect example of why printed books still outshine e-books (although you'll still need a phone or tablet to access the online extras).

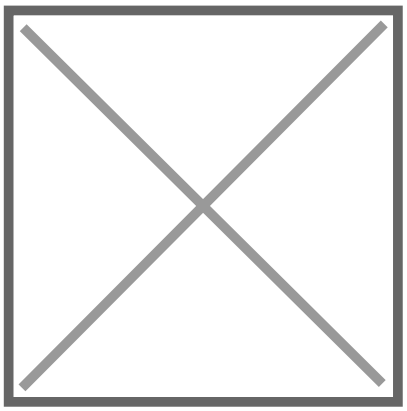
"Foster explores his struggles to remain present to life when a disconnection from nature and the demands of his professional life begin to deaden his senses. And his own reliance on nature's rejuvenating spiritual power is put to the test when catastrophe strikes close to home."



Animal Climate Heroes by Alison Pearce Stevens, illustrated by Jason Ford

This profusely illustrated science book presents young readers with engaging facts about four amazing animals. It's a perfect one-two punch, encouraging species conservation and saving the planet in one joyful package.

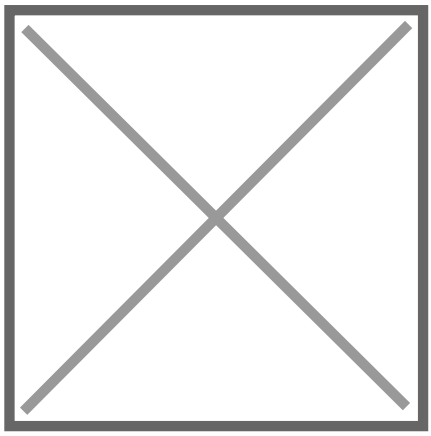
"In our left corner we have the meanest villain that's ever existed. Responsible for rising seas and loss of biodiversity, it's climate change ready to wreak havoc on the Earth. But in our right corner? We have four superheroes ready to save the day! Forest elephants protect our forests by trampling trees. Whales boost ocean health with their massive poo-nados. Sea otters defend kelp forests from purple invaders. And echidnas bury tons of soil to stop climate change. But we can't leave them in this fight alone. We need to protect our heroes who, in return, defend our planet. Get ready to learn all about these four legged, and two-flippered, creatures and how YOU can be a climate hero too!"



Wildflower Emily: A Story About Young Emily Dickinson by Lydia Corry

An unexpected joy of a graphic novel that brings classic poetry (and a classic poet) to new life.

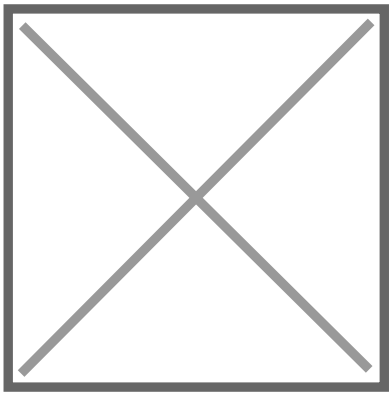
"Follow along as we delve into Emily Dickinson's childhood, revealing a young girl desperate to go out exploring — to meet the flowers in their own homes. Wade through tall grasses to gather butterfly weed and goldenrod, the air alive with the ‘buccaneers of buzz.' And, don't forget to keep a hot potato in your pocket to keep your fingers warm."



The Backyard Bird Chronicles by Amy Tan

Literary legend meets feathered friends. Tan's impassioned prose is complemented by her surprisingly accomplished illustrations. We're lucky this joyful and meditative book exists.

"In 2016 Amy Tan grew overwhelmed by the state of the world: Hatred and misinformation became a daily presence on social media, and the country felt more divisive than ever. In search of peace, Tan turned toward the natural world just beyond her window and, specifically, the birds visiting her yard. But what began as an attempt to find solace turned into something far greater — an opportunity to savor quiet moments during a volatile time, connect to nature in a meaningful way, and imagine the intricate lives of the birds she admired."

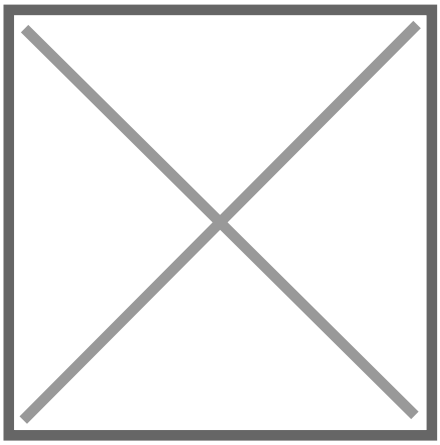


Bay Area Wildlife: An Irreverent Guide by Jeff Miller

You need to have a lot of reverence and respect for wildlife to write a book like this fun guide, which centers around one region of California but provides details on species that can be found in many other places. Even though I don't hail from the

Bay area or expect to visit soon, I found this to be an entertaining, informative, and occasionally angry celebration of wildlife and a vibrant part of the country. (Full disclosure: Miller is a fellow employee of the Center for Biological Diversity.)

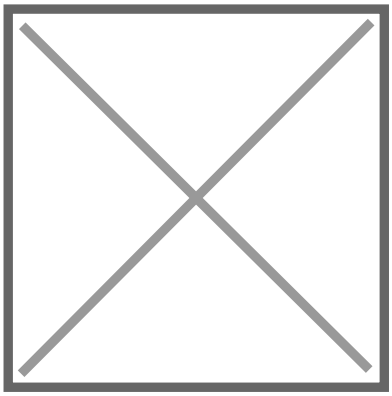
"Jeff Miller's quirky guide to the coolest animal neighbors in the Bay Area will have you gawking at elk, whooping with cranes, and crowning yourself a crossing guard for newts before you know it. Join Jeff on a local safari to meet more than sixty species of mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians, and insects, and discover the fascinating and sometimes bizarre mating, feeding, and athletic antics of our most charismatic animals."



Be a Nature Explorer! by Peter Wohlleben

I need to meet more young parents so I can watch them and their families put this book to the test.

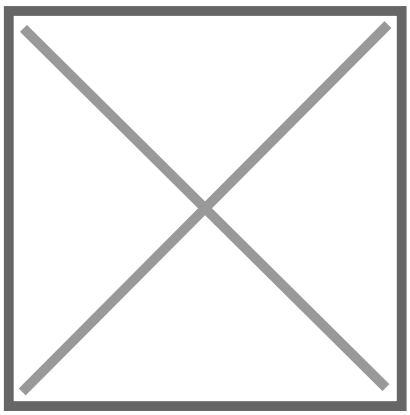
"Whether you are in the forest, in your own backyard, or in the city, there are so many exciting ways to engage with nature — and forester Peter Wohlleben has the best ideas for doing so. Kids will learn how to press flowers, harvest algae, skip stones, observe spiders, and even how to build their own tiny sailboat."



Chessie: A Cultural History of the Chesapeake Bay Sea Monster by Eric A. Cheezum

Cryptozoology (the study of wildlife that may or may not exist, like Bigfoot) can be a great lens through which to examine environmental issues like pollution and habitat loss. This book brings the mythical to life and gives it surprising relevance to the very real environmental problems we face.

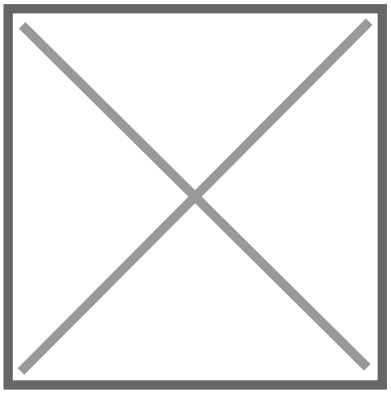
"In the summer of 1978, residents along the Virginia side of the Potomac River were startled by sightings of a strange creature lurking in the water. Eventually dubbed Chessie, this elusive sea serpent tantalized reporters and the public alike, always slipping away just out of reach… As the bay transitioned from a hub of labor-intensive activities to a recreational destination, Chessie became a symbol with multilayered meaning. Environmentalists seized the opportunity to educate the public on the bay's importance as an ecosystem, while tourists and suburbanites found solace in connecting culturally with the bay. Meanwhile, watermen faced the unsettling prospect of a declining way of life."



Phantom Border: A Personal Reconnaissance of Contemporary Germany by Kerstin Lange

Regular readers may remember Lange's Revelator essay about Germany's "Green Belt" and what it represents for humans and nature. That essay just scratched the surface — this book-length examination takes us on a powerful journey through the Green Belt's history, culture, and ecology.

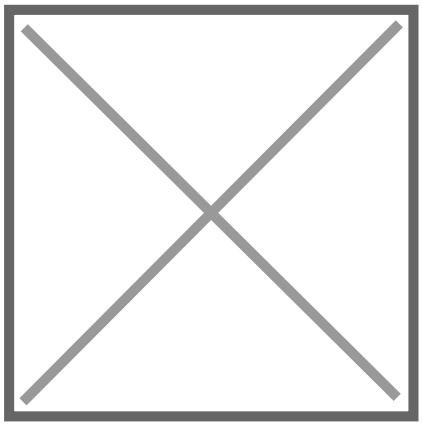
"During the four decades the Iron Curtain divided Germany and the European continent, over 1,200 rare animal and plant species found refuge in the border strip — today's Grünes Band or Green Belt. Lange uses the 1,400-kilometer-long German Green Belt as a map for a personal reconnaissance of her home country and as a prism through which to investigate the transformation of the border, along with the societal reverberations of the division and its aftermath."



The Forbidden Garden: The Botanists of Besieged Leningrad and Their Impossible Choice by Simon Parkin

A vital history book uncovering forgotten heroes faced with making choices few of us have had to make. It has painful relevance in a world where monocultures increasingly squeeze out rare and potentially valuable plants and crop varieties and the threat of war lurks around every corner.

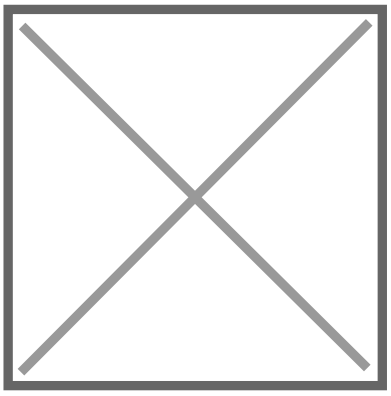
"The riveting, untold true story of the botanists at the world's first seed bank who faced an impossible choice during the Siege of Leningrad: eat the collection to prevent starvation, or protect their life's work to help end world hunger?"



The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World by Robin Wall Kimmerer

The kind of book that belongs on every end-of-year gift-book list — if only because it celebrates the exact opposite of the season's crass commercialization.

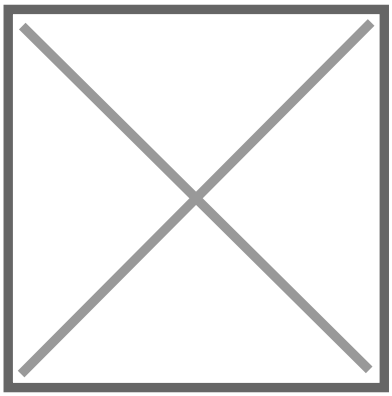
"As Indigenous scientist and author of Braiding Sweetgrass Robin Wall Kimmerer harvests serviceberries alongside the birds, she considers the ethic of reciprocity that lies at the heart of the gift economy. How, she asks, can we learn from Indigenous wisdom and the plant world to reimagine what we value most? Our economy is rooted in scarcity, competition, and the hoarding of resources, and we have surrendered our values to a system that actively harms what we love. Meanwhile, the serviceberry's relationship with the natural world is an embodiment of reciprocity, interconnectedness, and gratitude. The tree distributes its wealth — its abundance of sweet, juicy berries — to meet the needs of its natural community. And this distribution insures its own survival."



Notes From an Island by Tove Jansson with paintings by Tuulikki Pietilä, translated by Thomas Teal

Long available in Europe, this brief but illuminating tome by the author of the delightful Moomintroll series is finally available on our shores. It's half diary and half memoir — a love letter to a remote, rocky island, its challenging ecosystem, and its two human inhabitants. (I'm still upset about what they did to Big Boulder, though.)

"In the bitter winds of autumn 1963, Tove Jansson … raced to build a cabin on a treeless island in the Gulf of Finland. The island was Klovharun, where for 30 summers Tove and her beloved partner, the visual artist, Tuulikki "Tooti" Pietilä, lived, painted, and wrote, energized by the solitude and shifting seascapes. The island's flora, fauna, and weather patterns provided deep inspiration which can be seen reflected in all of Jansson's work, most famously in her bestselling novel The Summer Book and her longstanding comic strip and novels for children, Moomin. Tove's signature spare, quirky prose, and Tooti's subtle ink washes and aquatints combine to form a work of meditative beauty, a chronicle of living peacefully in nature and observing the island's ecology and character."

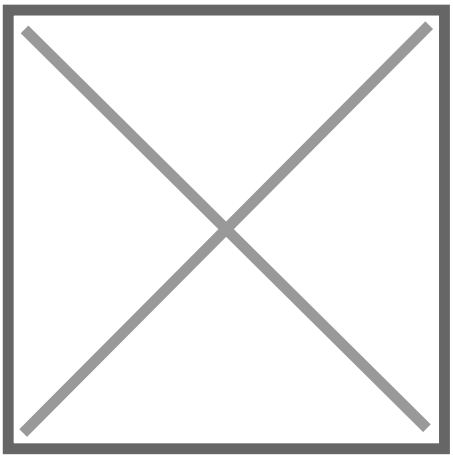


What to Wear and Why: Your Guilt-Free Guide to Sustainable Fashion by Tiffanie Darke

We don't usually cover books that focus on individual action, since we prefer to take a more systematic approach, but there's no more basic way to help the planet than by looking at the clothes on our backs — especially during this season of endless consumerism.

"Reportedly, the clothing industry produces 80 billion garments a year, employs 15% of the world's population, exploits labor, and seriously pollutes the environment. However, we as consumers have the power to make a difference with the clothing choices we make. Top fashion writer turned sustainability activist Tiffanie Darke sheds light on the unsustainable practices and immense environmental impact of

the fashion industry and presents a compelling argument for why transformative change is urgently needed."



Otherworldly Antarctica: Ice, Rock, and Wind at the Polar Extreme by Edmund Stump

A richly illustrated book by a scientist who spent four decades exploring the southernmost continent, seeing things few people will ever see. His stories and photographs bring that remote world to life (and remind us that we could lose this hidden beauty in the decades to come).

"With stories of Stump's forty years of journeys and science, Otherworldly Antarctica contains 130 original color photographs, complemented by watercolors and sketches by artist Marlene Hill Donnelly… Many of Stump's breathtaking images are aerial shots taken from the planes and helicopters that brought him to the interior. More were shot from vantages gained by climbing the mountains he studied. Some were taken from the summits of peaks. Many are of places no one had set foot before — or has since. All seem both permanent and precarious, connecting this otherworld to our fragile own."

That's it for this month, but you can find hundreds of additional book recommendations in the "Revelator Reads" archives.

This story appears in the **Covering Climate Now** feature series. View the full series .