

ident—a woman who had been the most critical voice about the new park—approached her on the street a week after the big celebration, and said to her, “Majora, I was there. I just wanted to let you know, you did it.” Carter responded, “I didn’t do it. We did it.”

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Richard Carstensen

A naturalist sets his sights on the tallest trees in the Tongass

HANK LENTFER

RICHARD CARSTENSEN ONCE TOLD ME he was the laziest person he knew. An odd statement from a guy who, in an average year, produces around fifty spectacular maps, writes volumes of field notes, publishes several essays, and becomes so absorbed in his artwork that he’ll draw until his hand seizes up. Several words come to mind to describe Richard—curious, passionate, dedicated, maverick, gentle, clever—but lazy is not one of them. I think Richard was referring not to slothful tendencies but rather his habit of doing only the things he wants to do. What Richard calls lazy Joseph Campbell would call following your bliss.

Pursuit of bliss has kept Richard from ever having an actual job. Likewise, he slipped from the grasp of conventional schooling. “I don’t have time for school,” Richard told me, “there is too much to learn.” His subject is anything to do with the natural world, specifically the rainforest of southeast Alaska. Each thing he learns reveals the next question, and his path has led to a breadth of knowledge few people achieve in a lifetime.

Richard doesn’t work to save something or elect somebody. He is more of a storyteller, using words, drawings, and maps to illuminate a beauty our digital world too often fails to see. His work encourages those caught in the divisive pace of politics to feel the rhythm of migrations and contemplate the complexities of forests. While many of us dutifully call our congressmen and write letters to land management agencies, Richard is quietly spreading roots of appreciation and understanding for the natural world. The growth from such roots will be maturing long after Richard has laid down his hand lens and pen.

Richard studied the natural world for many years from a tiny cabin a thirty-mile drive and two-mile walk north of Juneau. He never intended to become a teacher but students found him anyway. Boy Scout troops and school kids made the trek out to the cabin where he led bird walks and taught the fundamentals of mapmaking. Adults showed up to dine on wild edibles and sneak an intimate peek at the world through Richard’s eyes. Intrigued by the taste of teaching, he ventured into the public schools where he enchanted students and inspired teachers. Richard’s efforts in the classroom catalyzed the creation of the nonprofit group Discovery Southeast, which has grown to support nine naturalists working in Juneau’s public schools and three other communities. Richard remains the backbone of the group, coaching new naturalists and writing the newsletter.

Richard moves through the human world like a coyote negotiating the edges of urban sprawl, selectively gleaning the best that city life has to offer. He seeks out a variety of specialists to feed his curiosity, and is as likely to be found chatting with a forestry statistician or university taxonomists as with other long-haired naturalists. Wildlife biologists, ecologists, ornithologists, and hydrologists respect his breadth of knowledge and now seek him out to help ponder puzzles of the natural world. In 1992 he teamed up with an intertidal ecologist and a fisheries biologist to write *The Nature of Southeast Alaska*. This book remains the best general reference for the region.

In 1996, conservationist Sam Skaggs invited Richard on a sailing trip to begin mapping the remaining unlogged stands of giant Sitka spruce in the seventeen-million-acre Tongass National Forest. That trip launched the Landmark Tree Project,

