

Narrative for the Heart and Mind: What scientists see but cannot say

Speaker: Cristina Eisenberg, Oregon State College of Forestry, author of [*The Carnivore Way*](#) and [*The Wolf's Tooth*](#). She is preparing book about climate change and is a Smithsonian research associate.

Eisenberg framed her issue as a need for engaging people in science through great stories. It's not enough to provide information, she said. But how do you define the sweet spot for effecting change?

In addition to doing ecosystem research in Canada and the United States, Eisenberg participated in a writing residency program in the HJ Andrews Forest, an experimental forest with substantial stands of old growth, two hours south of Corvallis.

As a scientist, she has spent hours gathering data, but underneath that activity is a passionate individual. After documenting wolves, grizzlies other wildlife, she has to write up reports. She is told to present just the facts, but we need to engage a broader audience to heal ecological wounds.

The Carnivore Way is selling well and has gotten positive reviews. In the submission process, Eisenberg's Island Press editor rejected her initial "thesis" version of the book and encouraged her to include more stories. Not just the facts. She asked Eisenberg to write about why she does all this work, so Eisenberg wrote a 1200-word introduction that explains her personal journey into science. She was initially very resistant to it. It took a conscious effort to embed the science in her narrative.

Eisenberg read excerpts from her book and opened the discussion to group. She asked us to focus on this question: How do you use stories to make science accessible?

Kathleen Tuck (Boise State): Raptors are popular, and people like birds, but the research is rather dry. Scientists are resistant to the human-accessible story. She had to fight to get a compromise where the story was in one place and the science was in a press release. Her story drew international attention.

Alisa Zapp Machalek (NIH) found ways of obtaining stories in her science writing:

1. When arranging an interview, ask how you got into this, what's your journey, what are anecdotes?
2. Ask other people (with permission): relatives, colleagues, co-workers. You can get nice stories from people who have no reservations about telling them.
3. Ask the researcher for a visual description of their lab. What does the scientist see? Can uncover personal tidbits.

Eisenberg: When you can't get a story from scientist, they often have quirky quotes taped to wall or desk. Ask about quotes taped to computer screen. Joining scientists in the field is a good way to get them to be more candid.

Natasha Martineau (Imperial College): When she was younger, her piano teacher told her you need to have a compelling reason for playing a piece to a particular person. Understand what you want to say, and why, to a particular audience. Scientists are good at telling you what they think you want to hear. You need to ask questions to elicit responses outside of what they think you want to hear.

Eisenberg: Her editor asked, "why are you doing this?" As scientists, you spend crazy hours doing the work. Why? Answering that question provides text with aha moments for readers.

Eisenberg: Many scientists have had bad experiences with journalists. She had one early in her career. She received advice from colleagues: Always talk to media, but control what you say.