

## **84Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us**

### **Episode # 84 : Meet: Ayana Young**

<https://www.judithdreyer.com>

Welcome everyone to my podcast series The Holistic Nature of Us. I invite you to take a journey with me into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties us directly to the natural world around us. My intention is to be your guide for this half hour as we begin seeing our world with fresh eyes, gaining more understanding, and learning how can connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us.

I feature a broad range of guests deeply concerned about the environmental issues of our time and more; authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth and for all species help us create sustainable bridges of understanding. These folks are innovators. They're action oriented, creating solutions in a variety of ways that honor us and the planet's holistic nature. I am so honored to share their stories, their projects, and their passion with all of you. So thank you for joining me today for another engaging interview.

I'd like to introduce you to Ayana Young who is a podcast and radio personality specializing in intersectional environmental and social justice, deep ecology and land based restoration, with an academic background at the intersections of ecology, culture and spirituality Young was studying at Columbia when the Occupy Wall Street Movement began. And amid the burgeoning resistance in Zuccotti Park she co-created the environmental working group. Since then, Ayana has been the force behind a native species nursery and research center including the establishment of the One Million Redwood Project which was acclaimed as the most backed farm project in starter history, the film When Old Growth Ends, and Ode to The Complex Interweaving of the Irreplaceable Tongass National Forest during it's last stand as a distinctly wild place in Southeast Alaska, and for The Wild Podcast, a weekly show featuring thought leaders at the forefront of environmental , artistic, scientific, political and cultural shift.

Welcome Ayana Young to The Holistic Nature of Us. I'm delighted to have you share your experience, your journey and your thoughtful actions with my listeners.

**AYANA:** Well thank you so much for having me on the show and I'm really excited to talk about the natural world with you and all of that which just brings us so much life and joy.

**JUDITH:** It does. So let's start with your journey. How did you get into activism and specializing in deep ecology and land based restoration?

**AYANA:** Well I feel like I was always connected to some type of reality about the world from a young child onwards. I always had an intuition that something wasn't right about our dominant systems and our dominant culture and I didn't have the community or the language or really the understanding of how to be an activist or how to work with plants. I didn't have a garden growing up so it wasn't something that I was conditioned to be able to do, but it was, let's see, yeah I mean as a child there were so many moments that I just had a feeling that, you know, when I looked out at oil rigs off the coast of California or I would notice that another wetland was being filled and developed to be another tract home housing unit. Those things really affected me, but I didn't know how to explain why they were affecting me. I didn't know the word suburban sprawl. I didn't understand what ecological destruction happens when we continue developing in these especially fragile habitats. So again, it was more a feeling sense.

In high school I definitely had some rebellious moments, but it wasn't until, really Occupy Wall, that everything just came together. Before that I did study environmental studies. I was taking a course on different ways of understanding the earth and earth sciences but that didn't fully catapult me into what I'm doing now. I think those were all just steps.

And then Occupy Wall Street was really the fire because people were passionate. People were angry. There was a lot of rage. There was a lot of joy in organizing. There was a lot of, just more human relational, emotional component to the work, which is something that I really needed. And so when that happened, I really felt like I was being guided to do this work and basically overnight, a few days after going to Occupy and meeting my partner there; he was living at Zuccotti Park, we started the Environmentalist Working Group. We were organizing hundred people meetings and protests and it was so much amazing energy. I loved that time so much and from there I just never looked back. You know I went down to Patagonia for a couple of months with him and we were really in wild areas and I had never camped before in my life. And so here I am camping in this extremely wild

rugged place and a few months prior I had fallen in love with political organizing and activism and then in Patagonia I fell in love with the wild. And the culmination of those two experiences really set me on fire into this path that I am on now. So those are a few things that were these guideposts along the way and I just never turned back. And then I ended up leaving New York City and moving out into the woods of Northern Oregon where I then fell in love with the temperate rainforest and knew that that was really the ecosystem that I was going to be committing myself to. Then I started the podcast and *For The Wild* has just been growing organically from all of these different experiences that opened different doors that I felt called to walk through.

**JUDITH:** Well that's interesting. I find it fascinating how the intersection of perhaps experiences propels us into doing something more. I do a lot on a soul level, getting our soul's destiny and finding out what that is. And that's what excites me, especially when I hear my guests, such as yourself, relate a series of experiences that propel you forward into creating more and you've done a lot with coalition building. You're passionate about regenerative forestry.

So tell us how your new projects today are kind of weaving all these threads together.

**AYANA:** Yeah, so I had the podcast which I think maybe we're most well known for. The podcast was born during that time when I had left Oregon and was looking for a place to really root down and I was feeling extremely overwhelmed by the realities of our suffering planet and all of the creatures that we share this earth with. It was really overwhelming to understand the Anthropocene extinction more clearly and climate change. And out of that fear and confusion I started the podcast because I wanted to look to elders and thought leaders and really understand from them how to move forward. How to not just placate, or be complicit or even say, "oh well the earth will be okay. Let's not get too upset about. There was a lot of the rhetoric of the New Age at that point. So I was really grateful to look to these thought leaders who were being honest but also passionate to be engaged in how to move the movement forward, this movement for ecological, social, environmental, cultural justice. And the podcast really informed a lot of the one million redwood's project as well as the Tongass National Forest Campaign and the Copper River Delta Campaign, which were the other projects that we work on at *For The Wild*.

For instance, my first run at a podcast I interviewed Tom Waldo who is a lead attorney for Earth Justice and that's how I found out that we were cutting our last remaining old growth forest on our National public lands with our tax payer dollars. We have less than 2-4% of all old growth left globally. I didn't even know that we had that much old growth left and that it was also being slaughtered every day and I was actually paying for it. That was such a shock so that really catalyzed us to do storytelling and to help support grassroots organizations on the ground there to advocate to keep roadless rule in place, which basically says you can't build new roads into the Tongass in certain areas and you can't log in those areas, and hopefully mine.

We've been stopping the mining. And then similarly...well I'll do the one million redwood project last.

But the Copper River Delta I interviewed Dune Lankard whose an amazing Eyak activist from Cordova, Alaska and he has done so much to protect the forests and the waters there, especially after that Juan Valdez oil spill. We just got along so well because we were both completely obsessed with the temperate rain forest and he invited me up to raft the Copper with him, and I did. And from that point forward I just connected with him and his belief systems and that land so much that now we're partnering to protect eleven thousand acres of mountains from being exploited for coal extraction. If we're able to protect these eleven thousand acres we'll be, in a sense, protecting the three million acres around them because there would be no need to put in any roads to extract the coal. So that's how that project came to be.

And then the one million red woods project, that project, you know, spending so much time in the forest was really...the forest is what guided me to do this project because I was so in love with the temperate rain forest and I was witnessing and experiencing first hand...I was a commercial mushroom hunter for awhile so I was really in the forest and seeing how much has been logged and the huge difference between the old growth forest and the second growth forest and the third growth forest and the plantation forest and I knew there was a huge issue with biodiversity loss, forest cover loss, biomass loss, soil degradation and there are so many domino affects that happen after a forest is logged. And then I interviewed Diana Beresford-Kroeger, who I really look up to and between her interview and being with the forest, I had just heard that I needed to help protect what's

still here and to help steward in the next generation of forest into these very damaged places. And so that's how that project was born.

**JUDITH:** Well that's an amazing story. You know, again, feeling on fire to do something but actually doing it and with all your deep love for the temperate forest and living there, and I think that's the key to your work. It's that you've actually lived in the forest. I think nature talks to us in ways that we're still very shy about talking about in society today but some of the elders in our indigenous population have no problem with that because it's a part of their circle. It's a part of their culture to understand that we are so connected and that we can receive guidance from nature. And it's my feeling that nature holds the answers for many of our climate change issues today, if we just stop and listen, and observe and look.

So I know part of your program talks about, with the one million redwood project, tell us more about that because it's not just about solutions. You're also talking about building relationships to every tree that you put in that ground. Tell us more about that.

**AYANA:** Yeah so, even though planting trees... you know maybe I'll say oh let's plant trees and it seems like there's no bad way to plant trees, or it's all good just to plant a tree. But the more one looks into that, you know, where is this seed coming from? What are the genetics of that tree? What kind of soil was the tree raised in? What kind of plastic pot? How much water did it take? Was there perlite in the potting soil or peat moss that had to be mined from somewhere else so that these seedlings can grow? Who owns those seeds? Where are they being planted? How are they being planted? What kind of fossil fuel usage or machines are being used in order to prepare the land? Is the land being sprayed with poison? Are the trees being sprayed with poison?

You know so there is so much that goes into reforestation and there is a restoration industrial complex where things are done the way that I don't personally want to do. Now I don't want to say that I think all large scale tree planting projects are wrong. I think that we are in a climate crisis and if some industrial method...but if some people want to use industrial methods to plant a lot of trees than that's...you know, even though I don't think that's the best case scenario, I think it's a much better way to sequester carbon than a lot of other of these high tech ways that are coming out right now. So I just want to preface with that. But for me, yeah, it's very important that I

look at the entire eco system and I look at tree planting as a community project, a community of plants, the assemblage of what plants grow together, what fungi grows with them but also the community of humans that steward that land. So it's more about relational planting. Like relation planting of plants with each other, the relational planting of working with people in the communities. And it's much more, yeah; I look at this project as spiritual. I look at it as we are trying to create or recreate or re-ignite our relationship to the earth and it's slower. It's much more about listening to the forest and not trying to make quick decision out of urgency that may really affect us negatively in the future. Because that happens a lot you know. There are....a lot of people have good intentions and they'll make decisions that are actually quite harmful for the forest and otherwise. So here we're really focusing on genetics of plants, the biodiversity of assemblage of plants, the soil, rebuilding the soil and not using industrial methods, industrial potting soils or new plastic pots. So every part of this project, it's really important that we try to do it with as much integrity as possible, knowing that we'll never be perfect, knowing that there's no way for us not to use fossil fuel at all. So as much as I wish I could be a total purist, that's not possible for us at this point, maybe in the future. But I do think that looking at low-tech methods that more people have access to, even folks just wanting to grow plants in their backyards can utilize rather than creating these really complicated high-energy systems. I don't think that's the way forward.

**JUDITH:** Yeah, I think you're very practical with that too. You know I think if we get too caught up in the purist method, I think we lose ground. And today I don't think we can afford to lose ground, you know? There are so many tipping points. I had Doug Tallamy on my show, whose a bug guy, and he's done extensive research through the University of Delaware, and the numbers for our bug populations are seriously declining and there was a recent report that I just caught last week that we've lost 90% of our Monarchs just as one species that's really losing ground because of the way that we've treated our land. So I think what you're doing is not just admirable or inspirational, because it's both, but it's more than that. You're at the ground level, you know? You're working with the ground. You're working with the land in the best way that you know how.

You talk about too, planting the tree with rituals. Let me ask you two questions, Ayana. How many trees have you planted so far and what kind of rituals do you think people get excited about with planting the trees?

**AYANA:** Yeah, um, well I'm not just planting trees and I want to clarify that as well. We have definitely planted thousands of redwoods at this point. I think about five thousand redwoods we've planted last year between the last two years, yeah, between five and seven thousand redwoods. But we've also been planting thousands of under story plants as well and I know the trees get all of the spotlight, and the trees are very important, but like I said, it's really for me about the whole community and an assemblage of trees. The five thousand trees, well I want to say five to seven thousand because there were some trees that weren't just redwoods in there. But those were a part of the kick-starter. So those were a part of the rewards.

And then we had to take a couple of years to do indigenous consultation to really work on the nursery space and to focus on slowing down so that we weren't just plugging trees in the ground. Like I think there's...like I said earlier, I think it's important to do that but that's not where our project is really focused and so after I consulted with some local folks from around here, even though I thought I had a really good project, and I thought that I had looked at all of my blind spots, I started to realize that there were blind spots that I hadn't seen. And I really needed to take a moment and not just rush into this project with a savior mentality. And so I had to slow down with the actual physical aspects of the project and do a lot more research and a lot more relationship building. So since the tree planting, we did for the kick-starter, I have since then really moved into the more research and trying to find methods and experimenting with small test plots that I feel really confident getting behind. And this year what feels really exciting is we're back more in the physical realm with a project and less in the research and development phase, which I couldn't be happier about.

We're creating a living fence around the nursery, so we're actually...we've probably been growing out, gosh, tens of thousands of redwoods and Pacific Yew and black raspberry and, oh gosh I'm thinking about the greenhouse in my head and just seeing thousands of plants growing in there right now. So yeah, it feels really good to be back with the plants and not have to be focusing on the kick-starter work and also knowing that we've done a lot of due diligence with just thinking things through and making sure that we're going about it as respectfully as we can. And I'm sure that as the project continues, I'm sure there will be times that we have to restructure and change course a bit with more information that is coming out. But yeah, like I said, the project is really relational and so things take more time and what I'm learning is that that's okay and how that was something that was hard

for me to work through. Because I do have a lot of urgency and I have had a lot of grief about what's happened to the planet and the forest and in some way, of course, I want to be fast and I just want to fix things. But that mentality of just wanting to fix things is something I'm really trying to unlearn and have been doing that over the past couple of year with this project.

**JUDITH:** Thank you for sharing that. I know that nature works in it's own time and it's own rhythm. And I think it doesn't work with our, I'm going to say, corporate type of mentality or at least some of the Western lifestyle that we've adopted. So for myself as an herbalist, you know, if I got busy the plants grew and went to seed and died back in their time and I had to learn to work with that rhythm in order to be a successful gatherer of plants at their optimal time for health and healing. And I can see that same, you know, framework for yourself working with the forest and of course including the under stories is invaluable because they work together. There's a whole community out there and...so thank you for sharing that.

Is there anything else about the project that you'd like to share, or do you have any, I don't know, tips or practical tips that we can do. I'm in Connecticut here on the East Coast. I don't have redwood forests out here but there are certainly beautiful forests. We're losing, unfortunately we're losing some of our hemlocks because of climate change and some of the infestations that are going on, and like you, I have to tell you, it makes me also grieve and feel sad for what we're losing at this time in our development.

So, would you like to add anything else?

**AYANA:** Well gosh, yeah. I feel very grateful to work on this project. I feel like I don't think I'll ever be an expert and I'm not trying to be, and that's another thing that I'm trying to get away from the dominant mindset. You know it's really interesting to work closely with the forest in this way and try to hear what the next step is forward and not get too wrapped up in that. Like not get too wrapped up in like the...because a load of my friends say it's easy to get to a place where it's like oh, how can we do anything? Because everything in this system that has been set-up for us to live within is detrimental somewhere else in some way. You know taking water from one place, you're taking water away from that place to then put it into a nursery or whatever. And so there are so, so many steps with the project and it's

been really humbling for me to look through all of these steps and try to come up with the most respectful way forward.

And at this point, I feel really confident and positive that we are finding those ways that are gentle and thoughtful and it just feels so good to be with the plants again. It was yeah; it just feels so good to be collecting seeds. Oh yeah, that's something that I will mention is something that I noticed in the years of research and development with the Project is that there is a major seed scarcity issue. So you know if you even wanted to plant and I just use redwoods, if you wanted to plant millions of redwood it's like one, the germination rate is only about 7-10% per seed so you have to take that into account. But you have to also consider where are you going to get those millions of seeds? Who's collecting them and does the public have access to them? And what I've found is that it's actually quite frightening to see how little seed is available in terms of native seed. Now redwood is a little easier to find but it's not that easy to find. And the only reason it's a little easier to find is because redwood is kind of a popular tree and it's also used for logging and so most of the redwood seed that's collected is actually collected by the timber companies to do plantings to be cut down again. But if you're trying to look for seed for monkey flower, or you're trying to look for these more off the beaten path under-story plants that don't have an economic value in our system, people aren't really collecting seed or the people who are, it's not in bulk. And like I said, it's really challenging to find. So part of our project is really about collecting seed and creating a seed and fungal library that we can share with other restoration projects and other community forest projects, because at the end of the day I don't want the one million redwood project to be one of the only projects doing this, you know? I want more and more people to be involved and I really see our project as being a support system to other communities and to other and to other projects. So I love being able to collaborate and be in community with this work.

**JUDITH:** That's very, very interesting. I know that those of us in this field are very concerned about our seeds and what truly is available to us. I just opened up a package of mesclun mix from one of the big seed companies and it had maybe 14 seeds in it and that's it! And there was nothing else in there in the packet. I don't think the public in general is aware of who makes those determinations. So you're educating folks about that through your projects too, the value of seed and where they come from.

**AYANA:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I think it's really important for us to understand the complexity of these issues so that we're not just seeing like shiny pamphlet of everything that looks good but not really realizing what's happening behind the scenes. I think it's important for us to know and for us to be transparent with each other because we're not going to come up with actual solutions if we don't actually know the problems. So, yes.

**JUDITH:** That's true. I know there are some seed banks starting for some of our easier garden plants in various communities. And libraries are actually at the forefront of that, which is a very interesting cooperation within the community for people to bring seeds to their libraries, and then the libraries catalogue them and then they can exchange for other seed. So that's again, a grassroots movement that's slowly taking off. I don't think that's a major movement yet but I'm hopeful that that will take off more strongly as we continue, especially with what's happening today, you know? With the Covid virus we're home; we're sheltered and we have some time to get out in the yard.

**AYANA:** Absolutely.

**JUDITH:** Well Ayana I'm so grateful that you could be on our show today. Could you leave us with your contact information?

**AYANA:** My contact is my website, at [forthewild.world](http://forthewild.world) and you can also find us through social media and Instagram and Facebook and Twitter all at [forthewild](http://forthewild.world) and you can find the podcast on Spotify and I tunes and probably in a bunch of other places, Stitcher and so on and so forth. So yeah, and if you and if you want to reach out to us and e-mail us directly you can e-mail us at [connect@forthewild.world](mailto:connect@forthewild.world) and we respond to everybody. So yeah, for those folks who are listening who want to connect please do so. We really love building community and we're here for it.

**JUDITH:** Wonderful. And is there anything else you'd like to add before we sign off today?

**AYANA:** Well just thank you so much for having me on the show and for taking the time to talk about plants and trees with me. It's always something that I love to talk about and connect with people over. So thank you.

**JUDITH:** Oh, you're welcome. Again your projects are inspiring. Your passion is definitely felt, and I am so grateful to you too for the fact that

you're an example for us of how one person can make a difference! We just simply have to follow our passion and that's what I hear in your story is that one thing led to another and you're following your passion and look what's happening!

**AYANA:** Thank you. Yes it really was one thing led to another and I just kept saying yes and I just kept showing up and I continue to stay committed and I think that's part of it is that there's been a lot of ups and downs and things have not been flawless. There have been frustrations and setbacks and ego issues. Like just feeling crushed, my ego feeling crushed at times. I just kept waking up every morning and saying, okay, I'm going to get back on the horse. Like I'm not going to give up when times gets hard and I'm not going to just move on. I made a vow to the forest to be with them and I think that's really helped me stick it through. And I know this is also a lifelong project, all these projects. These are not fast. This is relational. It will take time and I'm in it for the long haul.

**JUDITH:** Well you know there are sayings about that. There's wisdom in there because the things that are worthwhile are the ones that do last and the ones that take time. And thank you. Thank you for sharing that with all of us.

**AYANA:** Absolutely.

**JUDITH:** Well everyone. This has been another engaging discussion today and I'm so grateful to Ayana Young for sharing with us her projects and for her inspiration.

This is Judith Dreyer. I'm the author of "At the Garden's Gate", book and blog. My book is available through my website [www.judithdreyer.com](http://www.judithdreyer.com) as well as several distribution arms such as Amazon, Nook, Goodreads and more. I'd like to remind all of you that a transcript is available for each podcast. Please like and share them. Let's get the word out and support each other.

And remember, **now** is the time for practical action and profound inner change so we value our world again.

Enjoy your day.