

Book Club Discussion Guide



For local or regional book clubs, college courses,
informal gatherings, ranger talks,
nature center workshops,
& personal exploration

In Search of the Old Ones: An Odyssey among Ancient

Trees is a journey into the heart (and soul) of long-lived trees.

The experiences are amazing and the discoveries awe-inspiring. It is the author's ultimate hope that you will have opportunity to visit these ancient titans – to touch their timeworn barks and walk beneath their arching limbs.



Your personal visit, it is certain, will transform you and open your eyes to some of Nature's greatest wonders.

Following are questions and topics you may want to include in a group discussion of the book. Perhaps you are a member of a local book club, a student or instructor in a college class, a ranger or docent in a state or national park, or simply a family traveling to one of the sites profiled in the book. The questions here will help you appreciate these botanical wonders – whether you see them in person or discuss them in any kind of formal or informal setting.

There are no "correct" answers to these queries – their design is simply to stimulate dialogue. By the same token, please feel free to "pick and choose" those questions that most interest you or the members of a group or class. There are more than enough here for every situation, encounter, or time frame (one evening or multiple class sessions). The intent is to foster robust conversations, support various points of view, and to positively engage everyone in a dynamic "meeting of the minds."

**Enjoy the discoveries;
savor the conversation!**

NOTE: Be sure to see the invitation on the last page of this document.

I. General Questions

1. What was the most fascinating fact you read regarding ancient trees? What did you learn that stands out as memorable for you? In what ways do you see old trees differently as a result of reading this book?
2. Would you recommend this book to someone? Why or why not? What kind of reader would most enjoy this book?
3. The author provided several examples of ancient trees in a historical context. How did that "ancient history" help you understand or appreciate old trees? How did it add to your understanding of these natural wonders?
4. Did you find the author's writing style easy or hard to read? Why? How long did it take you to get into the book?
5. Some trees have a long history...a very long history. Why do you think they have been so evolutionarily successful? Why have they endured when so many other tree species have died out? Is there something about their environment or their resiliency that has ensured their longevity?
6. Let's say you were asked to develop a Netflix documentary about ancient trees – that is, you have been asked to inform the public about the wonder of old trees. What will you include in your documentary that will help you achieve that goal and make ancient trees a "must see" travel destination?
7. From your point of view, what was the central theme of this book? How well do you think the author did at exploring that theme?
8. How would you describe ancient trees using just six words? Can you design a six-word phrase or sentence that encapsulates the significance or life story of these biological marvels? Here are a few you get you started:
 - Impressive titans against deep blue skies.
 - Against all odds these wonders stand.
 - Environmental survivors; markers of ancient times.
9. How much did you know about this book before picking it up? What surprised you the most about this book?
10. Which of the tree species profiled in this book would you most like to visit? What features or characteristics (of that species) do you find to be most compelling or significantly interesting? If you could only visit one species, which one would it be? Why?

11. Compare this book to other books you have read covering the same topic or theme. How are they the same? How are they different?
12. If you could write a letter to your local congressional representative, what would you say to convince that individual to devote more attention (or funding) to the preservation of ancient trees? How would you convince her/him to help preserve the longevity of old trees – either locally or nationally?
13. How thought-provoking did you find the book? Did the book change your opinion or solidify your philosophy in any way? What did you learn that you didn't know before?
14. Throughout the book are several illustrations of ancient trees and their environments. Which one did you like the most? What features or perspectives did that illustration have that most impressed you? How did that illustration help you appreciate or understand a specific tree (or forest) better?
15. There's an old saying that goes: "You can't judge a book by its cover." That said, how did the cover of *In Search of the Old Ones* influence your decision to purchase or read the book? How did the cover painting (of a stand of redwood trees) capture the theme of the book? If you could share your thoughts about the cover with the artist, what would you like to say to her?
16. Did this book create any kind of emotional response from you? What emotions were expressed by the author? What emotions did the author create for you as a non-fiction reader or as a learner?
17. The back cover of the book has several reviews written by other authors, as well as the head of a well-known environmental group. In what ways are those reviews consistent with your own personal evaluation of the book? If you were asked to pen a book review of this title (say, on Amazon.com), what would you share in 1-2 sentences?
18. On the inside front flap of the book is the following statement: "A tree that's lived more than 1,000 years is living archaeology – a tangible connection between the planet's past and present that helps us better understand its future." What does that sentence mean to you? In what ways does it encapsulate the theme and tenor of the book?
19. If you could design your own odyssey in nature, where would you go, what would you like to discover, or what would you like to learn? How would your odyssey be similar to, or different from, the author's odyssey?

II. Chapter Questions

INTRODUCTION:

1. The author talks about his childhood and the treehouse he constructed in his back yard. Is there an event or encounter you experienced that influenced your appreciation of nature in general or trees specifically? Please share your story.
2. The author makes the following statement, "[Tree's] evolution, and thus their longevity, is often a matter of environmental luck or circumstance...." In what ways do you agree or disagree with that sentence?
3. The following question was asked, "Because of climate change, do ancient trees now have an expiration date?" Having read the book, how would you respond to that query?
4. At the end of this section is a quote from naturalist John Muir. In what ways do you agree with that statement? How does that statement align with your own personal philosophy?

CHAPTER 1:

5. If you had the opportunity, what single reason would you offer for visiting the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest? What in the chapter would inspire you to travel to the Forest to see these amazing trees? What impresses you most about these long-lived specimens?
6. What did you enjoy most about the author's discussion of dendrochronology? Did you learn something you didn't know before? If so, what? What else would you like to know about this field of science?
7. The author's hike along the 4½ mile Methuselah Trail (p. 50-53) revealed many secrets about these long-standing trees. Which of those discoveries did you find most interesting? Which one impressed you the most?

CHAPTER 2:

8. At the beginning of this chapter (p. 55-56), the author presents a fictionalized account of an event that may have preceded an actual archaeological discovery. This historical perspective was done for every chapter in the book. Why do you think the author included these? How do these narratives add to your comprehension of ancient trees?
9. The Patriarch Tree is a unique specimen with a unique history. Why do you think the author took time to focus on this single tree? What information (about ancient trees) did you glean from this description? How did this particular tree add to your understanding?
10. The Clark's nutcracker bird is essential to the survival of bristlecone pines? Can you think of other species of trees (or plants) whose lives might be dependent on birds? What might be the long-term consequences if those birds were to disappear? Are birds essential to trees or are trees essential to birds?

CHAPTER 3:

11. Did Donald Currey make the right decision? Why do you agree or disagree with his decision? What might be some of the implications of that decision for the preservation of other ancient trees?
12. If you had the opportunity, what would you like to say to the forest ranger who gave permission for Currey to cut down Prometheus? What would you write in a letter to the Forest Service?
13. The following question was posed in this chapter: "What is our ongoing relationship with trees, and how will that relationship, in the future, impact the survival and/or existence of both forests and trees?" How would you respond? In what ways would your response align with the philosophy of environmental agencies such as The Sierra Club, The Nature Conservancy, or The Old Growth Forest Network, among others?

CHAPTER 4:

14. On page 84, the author writes, "On my first visit to explore the trees of Redwood State and National Parks, I stood in awe." Have you ever been in awe while visiting trees or hiking through a forest? What did you feel? What did you experience?
15. On page 85 the author laments his inability to generate sufficient adjectives for redwood trees. What are some adjectives you would suggest for these towering titans? Are those adjectives generated by what you read or what you have directly experienced?
16. Throughout the chapter there is a constant call to preserve and protect redwood trees. Why do you think that is such a vital issue? Do you think we are doing enough? What else should we, or can we, do to ensure the longevity of redwoods?
17. Near the end of the chapter, the author presents some "lessons" he has gathered from redwood trees. What are some personal lessons you have gained from trees or forests? How have your experiences with trees changed or affected your life?

CHAPTER 5:

18. The Black River is a vibrant ecosystem. What did you enjoy most about the author's journey down this river? What event or encounter stood out most in your mind?
19. On his journey, the author encountered the 5th oldest nonclonal tree in the world (p. 112). In your eyes, why is that tree particularly significant? What does that tree say about the longevity and preservation of all trees?
20. The author includes the following sentence near the end of the chapter: "Rivers flow through our lives, our expressions, and our history as does no other geographical feature." What does that statement mean for you? Why do you think the author included it in this chapter?

CHAPTER 6:

21. In many publications – both articles and books – Pando’s age has been misrepresented and misreported. Why do you think people continue to profile this tree as one that is much older than it is? Are people more inclined to accept a number just because it is in print rather than looking for scientific proof (as the author did)?
22. What would you see as some of the challenges in accurately dating Pando? How do you think scientists might deal with those challenges in order to arrive at a precise age for Pando?
23. Lance Oditt of Friends of Pando mentioned (p. 134) that “...Pando was reinventing itself despite botanical stress and challenges...” What does that statement mean to you? Why would that statement be important in a discussion of Pando’s longevity?
24. On page 142 the author emphasizes that a walk through Pando is cathartic (“There is a presence of calm and peace that overrides artificial intrusions.”). Has there been a time in your journeys through trees or among forests that has been significantly memorable or cathartic? Please describe.

CHAPTER 7:

25. Several Indigenous tribes in California practiced “forest gardening” – “...a form of controlled burning to prevent large, destructive fires.” Do you agree with that “ancient wisdom?” In what ways were those Indigenous people smarter than modern-day humans? Did they know something we don’t?
26. What would you say in response to the following statement: “Sequoias survive as a result of fire and they also expire as a result of fire?” Is fire the enemy of Sequoias or is it their friend? Please explain your position.
27. For many years the Forest Service promoted the following statement: “Only you can prevent forest fires.” After reading this chapter, is there another statement that might be more relevant or timely? What would you like to suggest?
28. What did you find most significant or amazing about the General Sherman tree? What feature or element stood out for you? If you were asked to write one sentence about that tree, what would you say?

CHAPTER 8:

29. *Quercus palmeri* is presented as a survivor of another age. Based on your reading of this chapter, what would you consider to be the chief reason(s) why it has survived for so long? What factors may have worked in its environmental favor?
30. Scientists have determined the age of Palmer’s oak by counting the number of growth rings present over a given distance and then comparing that number to the overall size of the tree. Why do you think that was an appropriate method for determining the tree’s age? What factors might affect that methodology?

31. What would you suggest in terms of initiatives or legal procedures that would ensure the survival of this tree? How could the tree be protected for future generations?

CHAPTER 9:

32. Visiting the Bennett Juniper is a long and arduous process. The journey is demanding for both vehicles and humans. Since the tree gets few visitors, do you think it is worthy of the efforts expended to preserve it? Please describe your rationale in some detail.
33. What reasons might you offer friends and colleagues for visiting the Bennett Juniper? What are the tree's most distinguishing features and why should people see the tree in person? How will visiting this particular tree add to our understanding and appreciation of arboreal longevity?

CHAPTER 10:

34. Imagine you were asked to create a sign to post next to the Seven Sisters Oak. In 25 words or less, how would you describe (or "advertise") this tree for visitors? What would you want them to know?
35. In what ways is the Live Oak Society preserving the longevity of live oak trees? How is the Society unique in ensuring the preservation of these iconic trees?
36. The author compares the Seven Sisters Oak to an octopus (a "woody octopus"). Do you think this is an accurate description? What might be another animal comparable to this tree?

CONCLUSION:

37. On page 208 the author shares an encounter with a neighbor. The neighbor asks, "What is the importance of ancient trees?" Having read the book, how would you answer that question? How would your response differ from the author's? How would it be similar?
38. Early in the Conclusion, the author talks about a shard of redwood ("...a wedge of ancient history...") discovered in the Lady Bird Johnson Grove Loop in Redwood National Park. Why do you think he focused on that piece of wood? Did he do the right thing by returning it to its place on the ground? Why?
39. There is a discussion of climate change and its impact on ancient trees in the Conclusion. What do you consider to be the most significant long-term effects of climate change on the longevity of trees? Why does that impact stand above all the other potential effects?
40. The author presents several organizations working to preserve the longevity of old trees. Which of those agencies are you most drawn to? How does their mission statement or environmental focus align with your own philosophy?

An Invitation

Enhance your next book club meeting via a personal Zoom conversation with me - the author of *In Search of the Old Ones: An Odyssey among Ancient Trees*. I offer book clubs throughout the U.S. an opportunity to ask questions, chat about common discoveries, talk about the book, and share insights in a welcoming environment full of energy and passion. In short, you'll have my undivided attention – an opportunity to interact with a “real live” author! The parameters are simple:

- You would schedule a Zoom meeting in line with your group's normal meeting day and time (and consultation with me).
- Please note that I am in the Eastern time zone (Pennsylvania).
- The Zoom meeting will last for approximately 20-30 minutes.
- The meeting should be scheduled 6-8 weeks in advance of a meeting date (to avoid any potential scheduling conflicts and allow sufficient time to promote the event).
- It will be assumed that each book club member participating in the Zoom meeting will have read the book prior to that meeting.
- **NOTE:** There is absolutely no charge for the Zoom meeting! No fees! No payments! No honorarium!

If interested, please contact me for further information
and to schedule a meeting date for your book club:

afredericks60@comcast.net

