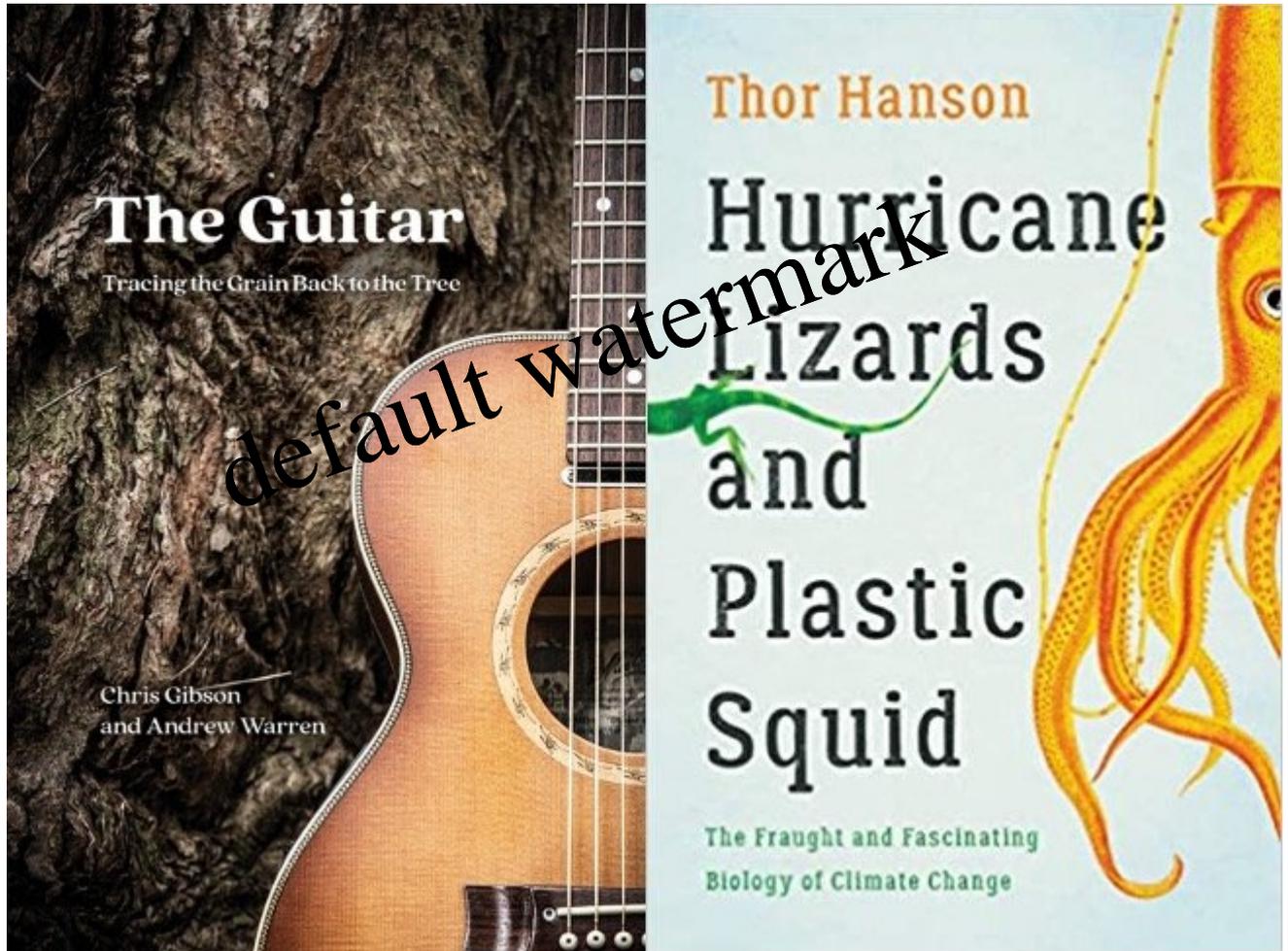


Trees, guitars, lizards and squid – perspectives on nature and music in the Anthropocene

Description



I've been a researcher in ecology for 40 years, but recently jumped into the world of guitars. These foci intersect in the increasing concern for how the natural world continues to be affected by human activities. Two recent books provide fascinating accounts of recent research in both these areas.

Research networks

I worked as an ecologist for all of [my professional career](#), researching, teaching and writing about the world's ecosystems and species and how to better conserve, manage and restore them. Working in a field for a long time lets you get to know the scientific community of which you are part – you know who is doing what, who the established “experts” are and who the up-and-coming young stars are. You get to know who your “tribe” are, who you like hanging out with, and who you'd prefer to avoid having to interact with.

The job entails keeping up with the scientific literature, taking part in academic debates, and – especially if you're in a field with strong practical application – interacting with practitioners who are doing the actual on-ground work. Being aware of other folks working in the same general area as you is important so that you can keep up with new findings, compare notes, discuss alternative viewpoints, and generally work to push the field of endeavour forwards – whether that's through collaborative efforts or butting heads and arguing things through.

How wide this network of associations is depends in large part on how broad you make your area of interest. There might be only a handful of people working on the same species or ecosystems or in the same places as you, but there will be a lot more who are working on similar problems and issues in different systems and places. And there are many different aspects to be considered – some purely scientific, but many also having important social and other aspects.

Interacting with others outside of your own particular area of interest can be immensely rewarding and beneficial – but it can also drag you well outside of your comfort zone. The same is even more true if you decide to jump areas of expertise altogether.

A stranger walks into a saloon

When I started thinking about the Nature of Music project, I spring-boarded from my expertise in ecology into the area of music and musical instruments. While I had an interest in music and a growing fascination with guitars and how they are made, I had no formal training in these areas. And none of the “inside knowledge” that arises from having spent a long time working in a particular field. No idea of who the “experts” are, and no real clue as to whether anyone else was working in the same general area – i.e., the cross-over between building guitars and the ecology behind the materials used to build them.

I felt slightly nervous entering this new field, wondering if I had anything useful to contribute or whether I'd be laughed off the stage.

It reminded me of an oft-repeated scene in cowboy movies. A stranger walks into a saloon in the old West, and the room goes silent as everyone turns and eyes him suspiciously. How many times has this scene been depicted in Westerns? Rarely does it result in anything other than a shoot-out. I felt a bit like that stranger walking into the Guitar Saloon and wondering what the reaction would be.

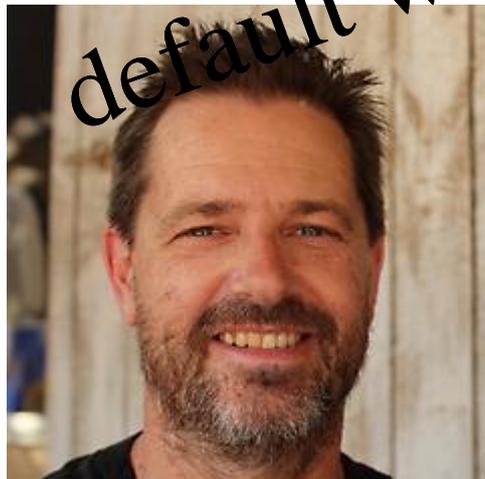
Connecting with a new tribe

Fortunately, a few years in, and after many delightful and illuminating visits and discussions with a variety of people in the world of guitar making, there haven't been too many suspicious stares or

potential shoot-outs to deal with. I'm beginning to feel less of a clueless newbie. It turns out that quite a few people have, like me, come to working on or writing about guitars after doing other things for all or part of their lives. And many of the people inhabiting guitar world seem increasingly interested in my world of ecology and conservation.

It's also been exciting to make new acquaintances with people who have found my posts and got in touch. Quite early in the development of the Nature of Music site, I was contacted by [Jeff Ollerton](#), a pollination ecologist based in the UK who shares an interest in guitars. He had written the occasional [blog](#) about guitars, and been considering embarking on a project similar to the Nature of Music before stumbling across my website – I encouraged him to continue to do so, given that there is plenty to think about and discuss in this area! We've been in fairly constant touch and exchange interesting articles and papers.

Similarly, in October 2020, I received a message from [Chris Gibson](#), a geographer at the University of Wollongong here in Australia. He'd also come across my website and let me know about the work he was doing with his colleague [Andrew Warren](#) on guitars and where their materials come from.



Chris Gibson



Andrew Warren

A new book

They had, in fact, written several papers on various topics directly relevant to my work on the Nature of Music (see details below). While sourcing these, I discovered that they had also previously done work on the [sustainability of surfboards](#). These guys know how to pick their research topics! Chris informed me that they had just finished work on a book on guitars that was due out in 2021. The book did, indeed, appear in print in May 2021, published by the University of Chicago Press. Titled “[The Guitar; Tracing the Grain Back to the Tree](#)”, the book is so relevant to what the Nature of Music tries to do that I thought I’d highlight it here.

Indeed, had I pursued my original intent of writing a book (rather than a website/blog), I suspect I’d have covered a lot of the same ground. The two authors took a similar approach to me at the outset of their project, visiting an assortment of guitar makers in different parts of the world. Some of the same people I visited also feature in this book. But they also went further in pursuit of the source of the guitar woods used by the builders. Through helpful leads and some detective work, they were able to visit or talk to people who source, process and supply guitar woods. And to visit some of the forests where iconic guitar timbers grow.

You can hear a short radio program about the book and its background [here](#) (and even more [here](#), if you want), and read about it [here](#).

Their original intent had been to use guitars as an exemplar of things which are produced by humans but have their origins in the natural world. They wanted to trace the route from the tree to the finished guitar – except they do this in reverse in the book, starting with the guitar and getting to the forest via the guitar factory and sawmill. They do a wonderful job of linking the final, amazing musical instrument with its history of transformation from living tree to specialist timber.



Chris Gibson and Andrew Warren tracing the guitar back to the tree. Source: [Illawara Mercury](#)

They delve into detailed investigations of three main types of guitar wood – rosewood, spruce and koa – and provide fascinating insights into the historical, geographical, social, economic and political aspects of these woods. In the words of the cover blurb, the book provides “a first-hand account of the ins and outs of production methods, timber milling, and forest custodianship in diverse corners of the world, including the Pacific Northwest, Madagascar, Spain, Brazil, Germany, Japan, China, Hawaii, and Australia.”

Past and future worlds

Along the way, however, the authors realised that the stories they were following were not just simple accounts of the supply chain between native forests and guitar players. In pursuing the background to past and current wood supply and use, the authors repeatedly bumped into the themes that recur on this website – colonial exploitation, overharvesting, increasing scarcity and endangerment of key species, and ensuing conservation and restoration efforts. Again, from the cover blurb: “(The authors) unlock surprising insights into longer arcs of world history: on the human exploitation of nature, colonialism, industrial capitalism, cultural tensions, and seismic upheavals.”

As they write in [one of their papers](#): “Our journey ended up somewhere else entirely: a rambling, nonlinear exploration of uncertain spaces characterised by material resource scarcity, political contestation, and upheaval in existing ways of doing things.”

More broadly, their investigations brought them face to face with global social, economic and

environmental trends, and in particular the advent of the [Anthropocene](#). They write near the beginning of the book: *“All is not calm in the worlds of guitar making, timber, and forests. There is apprehension and anxiety, as the ethereal realm of music comes face to face with the larger forces of colonialism, capitalism, and planetary-scale environmental change.”*

All is not gloom though. Although they uncover stories of over-exploitation and near loss of key species, they also explore a range of examples where people along the supply chain from forest to guitar are doing things differently – changing forest management practices, replanting threatened tree species, trying different processing and manufacturing methods, and using less or different materials. They make it clear that we’re at a critical juncture at the moment, where human activities have the potential to turn things around if we really want to.

Should you read this book?

Yes.

If you’re interested in the themes discussed in various posts on this website, this book offers a lot in terms of pulling many of these themes together in an engaging and persuasive way.

I enjoyed the book on many levels. First, because Chris, Andrew and I are covering some common ground, it is encouraging to see them reach some of the same conclusions that I do. Particularly pleasing, though, is reading about parts of the puzzle that Chris and Andrew uncovered that I had not come across in my own research.

For instance, their pursuit of the “origin story” for why [Brazilian rosewood](#) became central to European – and then US – guitar making took them to Brazil and Spain, and then finally to Portugal. Their research in Spain could find little indication that rosewood was an important import timber. But then in Lisbon, a chance visit to the [Basilica de Nossa Senhora dos Mártires](#) (Basilica of Our Lady of the Martyrs), a beautiful neoclassical church, yielded an important clue – all the wood in the doors, ceilings, balustrades and so on was Brazilian rosewood.

The church originally dated from 1147 but was destroyed, along with most of the rest of the city, in a great earthquake and tsunami in 1755. It was rebuilt in 1784 – using vast quantities of rosewood imported from Brazil. Chris and Andrew realised that rosewood coming from Brazil to Europe initially had little to do with guitars, and a lot more to do with the aftermath of a huge natural disaster.



Basilica de Nossa Senhora dos Mártires, Lisbon. Source: [Foursquare](#)

Their love of following leads and unearthing connections via good detective work – and sometimes just a bit of good luck – really resonated with me, because I love doing the same sort of thing.

Rabbit holes and narratives

Their willingness to change their narrative in the face of what they were finding also impressed me. As a researcher, one of the key things you aim for is as comprehensive an investigation into the topic as hand as is possible. But what does that really mean? Any question or topic is multi-layered and multi-faceted. Trying to answer one question inevitably leads to dozens of others. Finding a particular piece of information invariably provides many more leads on interesting aspects of the overall question. It's like a field full of rabbit holes, each one of which is fascinating to dive down into.



Many rabbit holes to explore. Source: [Steam](#)

Deciding which rabbit holes to explore is a key part of good research. Do you doggedly stick to only the rabbit holes relating to the initial focus of the study, or do you explore other, related rabbit holes that might yield different and sometimes exciting new insights? The answer to this often depends more on time and resources than anything else – a lot of research is funded to tackle particular questions, and exploring other interesting rabbit holes is not a common KPI. But where there is leeway to veer from the initial – sometimes quite narrow – question, there is considerable scope for valuable outcomes.

On the other hand, it can take a lot of courage to deviate from the initial aims of a project and admit that a new or additional line of enquiry is worth the effort involved. You become highly invested in the questions and approaches developed early in the project and may not initially be at all willing to consider looking at things in a different way. Indeed, some researchers are content to keep doing the same type of thing and answering the same type of question over and over again – and there is nothing wrong with that. But some of the most important advances arise from instances where someone takes the leap towards a different approach or perspective.

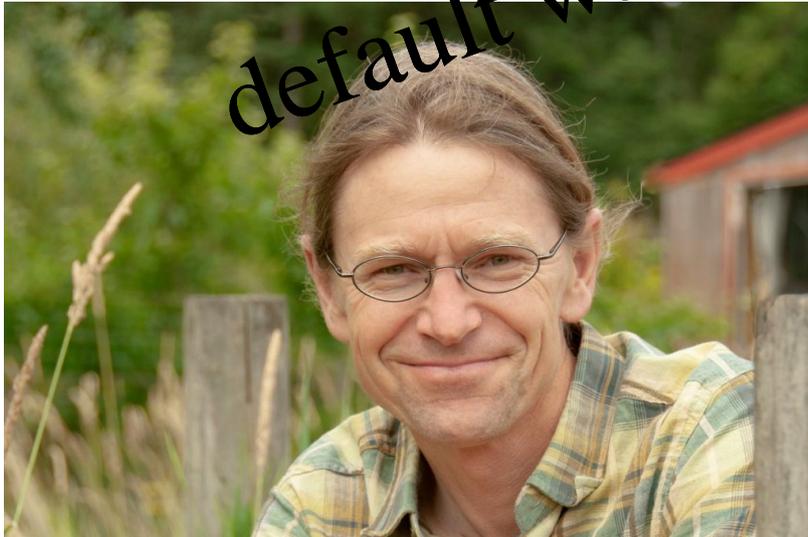
Narratives of change

In my field of ecology, we deal with complex systems and interactions, often unpredictable species behaviour and responses, and – increasingly – rapid change in all of these. Making sense of all this requires careful observations and experiments, repeating these through time, and being watchful for unusual results or sudden changes. We often have to balance the desire to be thorough and statistically rigorous against the limitations of time, costs and resources.

Often the species or systems you are studying don't want to play ball and your experiments and observations don't yield results that are sound enough to interpret unequivocally. And sometimes, they yield results that are the opposite to what was expected. Scientific progress is driven by the ability to determine which results can be trusted, but also by the ability to recognise when apparently bizarre results actually show something new and exciting (or troubling). And sometimes this also necessitates a change in the narrative.

Lizards and squid

Another book I've been reading recently provides an entertaining and thought-provoking look at how living things are responding to climate change. "[Hurricane Lizards and Plastic Squid: The Fraught and Fascinating Biology of Climate Change](#)" by Thor Hanson (2021, Basic Books) tells numerous stories about a range of species that are moving or adapting in the face of changing climates. Unlike the climate science itself, which some people distrust and argue with, there is little doubt in biology that living things are responding to changing climates in many ways, some completely unexpected.



Thor Hanson. Source: [Monthly Portland](#)

This book covers stuff I'm familiar with from my primary focus on ecology. With colleagues [Leonie Valentine](#), [Rachel Standish](#) and others, I've been involved in research that explores [how species move](#) or make use of [new resources](#) and situations, and how this affects the assemblages of species present in any particular place.

In his book, Thor Hanson introduces us to researchers around the world who have uncovered fascinating stories of species responses to different aspects of climate change. Often, the researchers did not start out with the intent of investigating climate change impacts, but happened to be in the right place at the right time to notice strange things going on with their study organisms.

Here, too, the researchers had a choice to simply carry on with the original questions they were investigating or to switch tack and focus on the unexpected findings. Without exception, a switch in focus led to important and exciting insights into how the natural world was responding to a rapidly

changing world. While some of the findings reflected a common refrain in conservation biology – namely local declines and extinctions – others gave insights into incredible resilience and ability to respond to change in unexpected but hopeful ways.

“Anole lizards have grown larger toe pads, to grip more tightly in frequent hurricanes. Warm waters cause the development of Humboldt squid to alter so dramatically that fishermen mistake them for different species. Brown pelicans move north, and long-spined sea urchins south, to find cooler homes. And when coral reefs sicken, they leave no territory worth fighting for, so aggressive butterfly fish transform instantly into pacifists.”
Hurricane Lizards, Advertising blurb

It seems that while humans dither about what, if anything, to do about climate change, other species are deciding for themselves and finding positive ways to respond that ensures their ongoing survival.

“Hurricane Lizards” and “The Guitar” use different lenses to focus on how the world is changing because of human activities, and both give plenty evidence that impacts are there for all to see. But both also provide glimpses of hope that there are ways for both humans and other species to respond to these impacts in meaningful ways. Let’s hope this is true so that the many different types of species and guitars around today will still be there for future generations to experience.

David Bowie: Changes (Live 1973). “Turn and face the strange”

Other related publications by Chris Gibson and Andrew Warren

Gibson, C. & Andrew Warren, A. (2016) Resource-Sensitive Global Production Networks: Reconfigured Geographies of Timber and Acoustic Guitar Manufacturing, [Economic Geography](#), 92:4, 430-454

Gibson, C. & Warren, A. (2018) Unintentional path dependence: Australian guitar manufacturing, bunya pine and legacies of forestry decisions and resource stewardship, [Australian Geographer](#), 49:1, 61-80

Gibson, C. 2019. A sound track to ecological crisis: tracing guitars all the way back to the tree. [Popular Music](#) 38/2: 183-203

Gibson, C.R. & Warren, A. (2020) Keeping time with trees: Climate change, forest resources, and experimental relations with the future. [Geoforum](#) 108: 325-337

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