Openlands Lakeshore Preserve Podcast
Reading the Landscape

FRIEDMAN: "We are of nature as well as in nature."

NARRATOR: Chicago artist Kate Friedman created these two panels of text. On one side are words that relate to nature and our ideas about the natural world, and on the other, words associated with human activities. The word "human" is on both sides.

FRIEDMAN: "Nature being outside of us and inside of us and around us at the same time."

NARRATOR: The title of this piece, "Reading the Landscape," comes from a book on ecology by May Theilgaard Watts. In it she describes how nature is inscribed with clues and stories about plants, animals, and the land.

The words here at the trestle encourage us to read the landscape in a different way, by showing how, in looking at nature we assign words to what we see. The words say as much about us as they do about the things we’re describing.

FRIEDMAN: "The idea of nature is an artificial one anyway. Nature exists without us. We try to define it with this language and we try to define it in all kinds of ways - with the built environment, or with art and literature and music. We’re trying to capture the sense of what is all around us through these other means."

NARRATOR: People close to the land—farmers, indigenous peoples, ecologists-- have a rich vocabulary to describe the plants and animals around them. With more people now living in urban areas, this vocabulary is becoming diminished.

The text panels reflect this: many words are more emotional than
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descriptive, reflecting romanticized ideas or fears of nature.

Ultimately, we are describing ourselves. We are a part of the nature and the culture that we put into words.

As you walk through the Preserve, think about the words you use to describe what you see, and think about things you see for which you have no words.

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