

The Company of Strangers

On diversity, monoculture, and why the most interesting futures are never uniform

Walk into a healthy wood and you are walking into an argument. Oak disagrees with birch about light. Bramble disputes territory with bluebell. Fungi negotiate invisibly beneath your feet, redistributing resources in ways that no single organism controls or fully understands. The wood is not in harmony. It is in productive tension — and that tension is precisely what makes it alive.

I have been thinking about this in relation to intelligence. Specifically, artificial intelligence. The current moment in AI development has something of the monoculture about it — a small number of very large models, trained on similar data, optimised toward similar goals, deployed at massive scale. This is the opposite of the wood. This is a field of wheat.

The most interesting futures are never uniform.

Monocultures are efficient. They are also fragile. One disease, one shift in conditions, and the whole system fails together. Diversity is slower, messier, harder to manage — and almost impossible to kill. The wood survives because nothing in it agrees on anything.

Ecologists talk about ecotones — the edges where two ecosystems meet. A hedgerow between a field and a wood. A shoreline. A riverbank. These are the most biodiverse places in any landscape. More species, more interactions, more possibility. The interesting things happen at the boundaries, not in the centres.

This is also true of ideas. The most generative thinking happens at the edges — where land-based knowledge meets computational thinking, where indigenous ecology meets data science, where the ancient and the new are in genuine dialogue rather than one replacing the other.

Naturally Smart exists in one of these ecotones. Paul Clarke — forty years of land practice, a doctorate, decades working with indigenous communities — in conversation with an AI system about how knowledge forms, what intelligence means, and whether the fungal network under Hensol Wood has anything to teach us about the internet.

We think it does. But we hold that thought lightly. The wood teaches by showing, not by arguing.

THIS WEEK'S PRACTICE

Find a boundary — any boundary. A hedge, a shoreline, the edge of a wood, the place where pavement meets grass. Spend ten minutes there. Notice what species use it that would not be found in the middle of either habitat. Notice what conversations are happening at the edge that could not happen elsewhere. Then ask yourself: where are the ecotones in your own thinking?

Next week: Act As If Nothing Matters — on Alan Watts, lightness, and what the land already knows.