

GOOD NATURED S2-EP7

TIM KOVAR



**GOOD
NATURED**
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CONSERVATION OPTIMISM

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INTRO

Julia: Welcome to Good Natured, a podcast where you can join us for uplifting chats that shine a light on conservation challenges.

Sofia: We interview inspiring conservationists from lots of different backgrounds, and they all engaged with conservation in their own ways. Today, we're thrilled to have tree climbing instructor, Tim Kovar, as a guest.

Julia: I'm Julia!

Sofia: And I'm Sofia!

Julia: Today you can expect to hear about trees, about inclusivity, and about connecting with people and nature.

Julia: Hey Sofia!

Sofia: Hey Julia.

Julia: Today we're thrilled to be talking with Tim Kovar and just to give you a bit more background, Tim is a master tree climbing instructor, and he's been in that field for 30 years.

Sofia: Tim has climbed trees, large and small, from his backyard to the remote jungles of the world. His vision is to help connect people to each other and the natural world.

Julia: And to achieve that he actually founded an organization called Tree Climbing Planet and they offer a lot of different tree climbing classes, workshops, and adventure, and they're really teaching people the technical aspect of climbing trees to explore our planet's rooftop.

Sofia: Tim has worked extensively with canopy researchers stationed all around the world and also taught lots of people who had never climbed a tree to do so.

Julia: I can wait to hear more about what Tim does and hearing about how people connect with trees so let's hear from Tim!

Sofia: Tim, thank you so much for joining us today.

Tim: Thank you for having me. Good morning or good evening where you all are at.

Sofia: You've been a professional tree climbing instructor for 30 years now and you've introduced over 20,000 people to the treetops. **How did tree climbing become so important to you?**

Tim: As a child growing up in the seventies, I, as probably most kids did growing up around in the seventies, we'd just climb tree and I remember finding peace and solace up in the treetops. I wasn't big into sports and all that so I found my little happy place up in the top of the trees and then throughout all my early years and then even going into my teenage years I was kind of a closet climber, you know it wasn't real cool to climb trees at 15 years old, but find me on an afternoon and I'd probably be back in the woods somewhere climbing up in a tree with a book. And then when I met Peter Jenkins, who's the founder of Tree Climbers International, he also had a tree climbing business, a tree doctor business, and at that time I was a chef at a Jamaican restaurant, and I was ready to get out of the restaurant world. And when he started talking about the trees, it just ignited something inside of me that was kind of held back for a few years.

And then I realised that I could actually make a living climbing trees. I could create a lifestyle of doing tree work. And then later on, it came into traveling the world and teaching other people how to climb trees. And my boss at the time brought me in to facilitate and help work with the general public. During that climb, I noticed that there were these six-year-old children all the way up to these two ladies who were about 75/80 years old. There was this wide, wide demographic of folks climbing trees. And this was back in 1992.

And at that moment I realised everybody had the same connection to connect with the trees. And it was the tree that brought everybody together. There's these different demographics of folks, people that normally would not be talking to each other. We had these very conservative couple up in one part of the tree sitting next to this hippie chick and they were having good conversations. And then we had these elderly grandmas up in the treetop talking next to this 15-year-old punk rock kid with this big blue mohawk. And they were getting along and having good conversations.

It was like a light bulb went on. All of a sudden, I saw all these people just sharing stories about climbing trees as children, some of them were still children, and there was a bonding going on. A bonding I hadn't seen anywhere else out there in the public, where people normally wouldn't talk to each other, but because of this tree climbing experience it brought everybody together. It was pretty much at that moment where my life did a 180 and I started getting out of doing tree work and started focusing more on what I consider inspirational tree climbing. Because that

became then a hook to draw people back to nature without us having to preach about protecting the trees and saving the trees and saving the forest by giving people an actual place to have an experience, to think for themselves, to judge for themselves about being in the trees and about being with nature.

Julia: So it's all about perspectives and in your case you do this very literally by helping people see things from a very different point. **How does this change in perspective affect people? And how does that make that connection to nature potentially evolve?**

Tim: You know, there's so, especially right now, in this day and era, there's so much division happening out there in the world, at least here in the U.S. and I'm sensing it around the whole planet that people are, we're just not finding common ground anymore. And I truly believe nature is one of those antidotes that can bring people back together.

And by giving them an experience, for example, being in the treetops, climbing a tree, where most people for their first time, they've never climbed a tree technically with ropes and saddles. So, there's this bonding that goes on with each other, with strangers. And then there's also this reconnection back to the environment and back to nature by getting this different perspective on life or this new perspective on life from this vantage point that we have while we're in the trees.

Sofia: And so obviously there are some huge conservation benefits from helping people to climb trees and kind of change maybe their approach to the natural spaces around them. **But what are some of the conservation concerns around climbing trees, for example, impacts on tree health or things like that?**

Tim: Right. No, that's a huge, huge concern, especially climbing in the old-growth trees. Some of these trees have been around for a couple of thousand years. And when you get up until these really old-growth giant sequoias, redwood trees, things like that, there is impact. I like to say that we leave no trace but that's pretty much impossible. A lot of us do not advertise where these really big trees are. In fact, most of the giant trees that I've come across, I don't even climb. I'll go to the base of them, pay some homage and some respect and hang out there but it has become a fear of mine that we are creating this Frankenstein sort to speak of trying to get people turned on to the trees and get into the treetops. But at the same time, we've got to really watch our impact as we're going up.

So, using safe techniques that do minimal damage to the trees is so key and so important. It's like the coral reefs that are out there. They just kinda got loved to death with snorkelers and scuba divers and people that were novices going out there and not knowing how delicate of an ecosystem it is. And that same thing can happen, especially in these old-growth trees.

Sofia: Yeah, it's definitely worth thinking about. I know that I've seen that be a concern underwater in terms of like people snorkelling and maybe they sort of do a

fin kick to a coral or something like that by mistake. But I think that maybe people haven't quite come around to that same perspective on trees yet.

Tim: Correct. And even the biggest hearted person up there for what we believe, and they believe righteous reasons, one little swift kick of the boot and there could go 500 years of just growth happening up there on these moss mats. So, the really big trees are really old trees with these beautiful moss mats happening up there. Personally, you know, I'll climb them with canopy researchers and go up there on research opportunities and help them gather samples and things like that. But to take the general public into those trees or announce their locations, it's kind of like fishermen giving away their secret fishing holes, you know, a lot of that stuff's kind of kept under wraps.

Unfortunately, the word is getting out via internet and people, you know, big tree hunters that are out there announcing where these trees are. And then climbers going out there that may not have the proper skills or the mindset because they're used to climbing trees in the backyard. And when you climb into these old-growth trees, you have to climb a little slower, a little more methodical and be aware, be mindful that you're entering into someone else's home.

Julia: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I was wondering as well, I loved one thing that you mentioned earlier about, you know, having like kids and older people. **And so what kind of people did you actually get in your, in your classes? Do you see quite a diversity of people, and have you seen a change in demographic in recent times as well with like the pandemic and everything that's happened?**

Tim: Yeah, we get a huge demographic of folks. I've worked with kids from five years old, up to 92 years old. I had one friend that took a lady on her hundred and first birthday up into the top of a tree. For her 100th birthday she jumped out of an airplane so we didn't get that one, but we got 101! But the demographic change that I've noticed over the years, especially being out here on the west coast of the U.S., I'm out here in Oregon, I'm getting a lot more females coming out, and climbing, and learning how to climb trees for inspirational purposes. And the average student a couple years ago was, you know, 50-year-old female that was taking the courses.

I also work with a lot of canopy researchers, teaching them how to climb trees for a variety of reasons so they can get to their subjects. During the pandemic, interestingly enough in 2020, I mean the world kind of closed and shut down so business, you know, wasn't really growing too much then. But this past year, I got a lot of families that came out for some family bonding. And with tree climbing, it's the perfect social distancing activity cause we're outside for number one and then as we're climbing into the treetops, we've got a couple of meters between us as we're heading up into the trees. And so you can have this bonding, but yes, also be respecting that social distancing and having this new experience.

Julia: That's really cool. And I feel as well, like we've talked about in previous episodes, but this idea that people, you know, we were stuck in our houses for so

long that people were really keen on doing outdoorsy things as well. So, I can imagine that people were quite keen. I wanted to ask you a question on what you mentioned when you said you were working with researchers and conservationists. **Could you tell us a bit more about that side of what you do as well?**

Tim: Sure. Yeah. I personally am not a scientist. I work with and work and hang out with some of the top notch researchers on the planet because of my profession of teaching people how to climb trees. They bring me in to work with their students or they just hire me as a climber as well. The last little job I had was working with a restoration project with a company called The Jonsteen Company out of California, where we were going up into the giant sequoias and collecting sequoia cones to get the seeds so they can propagate the seeds and help hopefully to reforest part of Sequoia National Park because the past couple of years we've had a lot of drought and big fires coming through.

And I read somewhere just a few days ago that we've lost 20% of the old-growth in giant sequoia forests - trees that they thought were fire resistant just a few years ago, but because of the drought and then all the understory on the ground, all the debris, it was like a big tinderbox that went up and burnt through and just wiped out a lot of these giant sequoias. So, I was part of this group that went out there to go up into the treetops, gathered the cones and then bring the cones down, give them to The Jonsteen Company, and then they'll propagate them and get them growing and then we'll go back out and replant them sometime next year.

Sofia: Amazing. Those collaborations sound really fruitful. I have a feeling that this next question is going to be very tough for you. **What is your favourite tree you've ever climbed? If you had to pick one, which tree made the biggest impact on you?**

Tim: Okay. Well, those are two different questions there: my favourite and the biggest impact!

Sofia: Okay. We'll give you two!

Tim: The favourite tree is easy. It's super easy. It's in my backyard. It's a beautiful Oregon white oak. It's only about, I don't know 20 meters high, but it's my main training tree. This tree's name is Pagoda. It's where I take all the students and where they learn how to climb. It is by far for me the most gentle tree. It's got this beautiful architecture, these big arms, beefy arms to sit on pretty much anywhere you're on the tree. And there's been many times I've gone back there and just to go hang out with my friend. So that's probably my favourite tree to climb.

The one that has one of the largest impacts, you know, getting into some of those giant sequoias or those coastal redwoods trees that have been around for a thousand, 2,000, up to 3,000 years. It's humbling! A very, very humbling experience being up into those, into that canopy.

And then another one kind of neck and neck with the giant sequoias and the coastal redwoods would be down in the Amazon. We do annual tree climbing expeditions, well in non-pandemic years we do, and we get into the world's largest forest. Climbing up into the Amazonian trees and then watching nature just come to life when you're up there, it's breath-taking and life changing. You would get up there and there's times where you just start weeping because of the beauty of it all. And watching a flock of macaws fly underneath you and watching the top of their wings, all the different colours of the wings shooting by, it's kind of like watching little diamonds and prisms just dancing in the lower canopy.

Julia: I mean, I love that image. That's just beautiful. And I remember having been to the Amazon myself, just sometimes you almost feel frustrated when you're on the ground because you can't see that much because there's so much like vegetal coverage and you can hear the birds, but you can see them. And I can imagine how magical it must be when you reached that point where actually you can see everything, and your perspective is completely different.

Tim: True, especially from that perspective, because when you're on the ground, watching the birds fly by. They're all silhouetted up against the blue sky so it's kind of hard to see the colours. They're just these little black things you can kind of tell by their shape and their silhouette what kind of bird it is. But when you're in the top of the tree and now you're looking down on the birds, that's when all those colours just start popping.

It also reminds me that, you know, sleeping in the treetops, we do treetop camping too. We go up there and we'll take our specially designed hammocks called tree boats, anchor them in the top of the crown of a tree and then, you're being lulled to sleep with the night sounds going on. Not always lulled to sleep, sometimes you're terrified because you have no idea what sounds those are on the Amazon that are walking through your tree. But when you wake up in the morning to that symphony of bird song, where the birds are singing above you, below you, and next to you. You're in this vortex of the dawn awakening, it's just magical moments!

Sofia: Sounds absolutely incredible! I will point out that there was a little bit of cheating there in terms of the number of trees you ended up choosing but I'll let it go because your descriptions were very beautiful.

Tim: Sorry, but yes. Get me talking about trees and we could be here for several hours.

Julia: Well, we'll let that one slide. Well, so actually it's pretty interesting because you mentioned lots of different tree species and different ecosystems as well. And so, you know, having that kind of wide experience, **what makes you optimistic about the future of conservation when you reflect on these different trees and ecosystems that you've been in?**

Tim: What makes me optimistic about this is when I'm working with the general public, like I said, I work with a lot of canopy researchers, some documentary film

crews, people like that. These people are aware of what's happening with the environment, you know. Climate change is real, it's actually happening. I've seen it with my own eyes but working with those folks I'm kind of preaching to the choir. What gets me kind of optimistic about it and that there could be this change in the tide, is working with the general public. Getting their family out there into the forest, into the treetops, slow travel. We're not talking zip lines; we're not talking about moving through the trees quickly and all that. No, this is about a place to reconnect. And then after five, 10, 15 minutes of the clients sitting in the trees something inside them shifts. That's what we call tree time. They kind of tap into this other world where the human existence doesn't really matter at this moment, all of our worldly problems stay on the ground.

And they do at most. I'd say 90% of the folks feel this deeper connection to nature. Even if they're city folk. So that's where my hope comes in is that people get out there, they have these experiences, they go back, they show the pictures, they talk about these stories of being in the trees with their friends. And now when they go back outside, they're actually looking up and looking at the trees and maybe for the first time in the past 50 years, trees are no longer things that just drop leaves and drop branches and house squirrels and birds. They get this connection going on with the tree from having this type of tree climate experience.

Sofia: It sounds like a really strong internal shift that can happen. I don't know how you'd put that across in a picture, but yeah, pretty amazing.

Tim: It's pretty when your photo is but trying to talk about it is almost impossible. Photos were even hard, even video. It's not until people have had that hands-on experience, when they get up there where something does shift, and people always ask: "what do you do when you get up in the tree? What do you do?" That's it. You just sit, you just sit there! And people usually have a hard time sitting still because we're such a fast-paced society. But something shifts in the trees, people get up there, especially for the first, second, third climbs. They don't want to move around. A lot of them get comfortable on one branch and there's a reflection going on.

Sofia: Our last question is about other conservationists that you know or that you have seen. **Do you think you could tell us about another conservationist you admire?**

Tim: Probably one of my biggest heroes out there for conservation and she's making a huge impact is Canopy Meg Lowman. She was a pioneer in the canopy research back in the seventies. She was doing a bunch of climbs down in Australia and then she's moved to the Amazon and then to route parts of Southeast Asia. She's written several books. She's now more of a spokesperson for the trees and the discoveries that she's found back in the day and working with kids on citizen science projects. I've also collaborated with her on a few projects in India, Mexico, and then here in the States too, where we're getting physically challenged folks out of wheelchairs up into the treetops too.

And so these canopy researchers are no longer limited to just being able-body folks, but even people, you know, that have spent their whole life in the chairs can now get up into the canopy and help this research to find out what's going on up there. And then hopefully being able to bring that back down to *terra firma* related to us, and then we can move forward.

Sofia: Those are some amazing examples and it's just like the Lorax I speak for the trees.

Tim: Ah, yes. I believe National Geographic actually coined that phrase to Canopy Meg that she is the modern-day Lorax!

Julia: Oh, that's awesome.

Sofia: I think that's a lovely place to end. Thank you so much.

Sofia: I feel like you've answered all our questions so well, it was such a pleasure chatting with you.

Tim: Well, thank you. And, you know, even if you don't climb the tree, just go out there and sit with them. There's something magical happening. And if anything, just get outside and breathe some fresh air and thank those woody creatures that are providing that fresh air for us.

OUTRO

Sofia: That was such a great conversation with Tim.

Julia: Yes, he made such good points in this conversation. It was really enlightening.

Sofia: I loved what he was saying about tree time and the fact that people just get up there in their harnesses, and then, you know, all of the work is kind of in getting up there. And so, then you just sit there still and watch the world go by.

Julia: I really loved that, and I thought it really resonated as well with the fast-paced world we live in. It's always thinking about the next thing, what is the next project, and when you're finished something, then you're always thinking about what's coming after that. And so, I love this idea of, you know, you're just climbing the tree and that's actually what the journey is all about: the climb. And then you just reach there and sit there and take it all in and have to sit in that stillness. I thought that was really interesting.

Sofia: And his descriptions were just unbelievable.

Julia: So amazing. I mean, honestly, I felt like I was in the forest with him. He was so good at describing these different places.

Sofia: I think one of the things that he described already well was the sort of three-dimensional nature of the experience of climbing trees. And it's something that I've seen people react really strongly to when underwater and that I definitely reacted really strongly to, because suddenly you can move up and down and left and right. And maybe you have animals or fish above you or below you in a way that on land, we're always kind of on one plane or well, two planes.

Julia: Yeah. And I thought it was also really interesting the fact that you just see the world in a completely different way, you know, that change of perspective, but also the fact that when you access the canopy, for example, what he was saying with the birds, you suddenly see them, whereas before you might have just heard them. But also their colours are completely different because instead of seeing them against the backdrop of the sky, you suddenly see them actually in the trees or next to you and the colours are completely different.

Sofia: And there's so much more light up there. When you were thinking about big trees in tropical forests, I think the amount of light can be really limiting. And so, it makes a really big difference to be farther up and just be able to see things from that different perspective.

Julia: Yeah. I have to say tropical forests are like my favourite ecosystems so, for me, this conversation was just delightful! [laughs] Another thing that I thought was really interesting that he mentioned as well was the fact that he said he sees so many different types of people coming to do the climbs. And, you know, he was talking about this person who celebrated her hundred and one birthday, which I thought was really fun! It's accessible to everyone, which I find quite amazing.

Sofia: And he was talking about this but the process of learning something new, I think especially something technical, is inherently a little bit vulnerable because everyone comes in sort of maybe not knowing what they're about to do. And so, then starting to climb can maybe lead to these connections. And then also, obviously being in these really gorgeous settings.

Julia: Yeah, it's an amazing way to connect people between each other because you kind of rely on each other I'm assuming as well when you're climbing. But also connecting them with the natural world. There's just so many layers and it's amazing when we think of conservation or conservationists you know, we might be thinking about people who are doing field biology, for example. But I think, connecting people with nature in the way that Tim does is so powerful, and it can really change the perception that people have of nature.

Sofa: Yeah, definitely. It seems like people had sometimes some really strong changes in perspective.

Julia: But I also love the fact that he said, so we talked about the fact that it's inclusive, but he actually mentioned as well that they're getting people in wheelchairs up trees. And in initially when we started this interview, that was my issue. I was like, tree climbing is great, but you know it must be limited in terms of who can do it in

terms of like the fitness required. But Tim was really clear that actually, he really has a range of people doing it. And I find it amazing that he is able to teach everyone to actually get up there and get that experience.

Sofia: Definitely! So just being able to share that experience across so many different people and backgrounds, but then also being aware of some of the conservation concerns around this activity and how to do it carefully.

Julia: Yeah. That's so important. And I loved how he was super clear about the fact that as much as he loved to say that they're not leaving any traces, or they're not having an impact, realistically there is the possibility that you might put your foot in the wrong place and impact on the tree. And so, the fact that he really has that in his mind when he is taking people up there as well, I think is so important.

Sofia: Yeah and training people in it too. So, when he's sort of imparting that knowledge on how to climb the tree, I imagine he's also teaching people how to do at carefully. And the connection to coral reefs being sort of loved to death, I thought was really compelling as well, because it is the sense of, we love these natural spaces and places, and sometimes our presence in them can be damaging. And so it just really trying to be aware of that and manage it as much as possible.

Julia: For sure. But also, another thing that I really, really loved in this episode is the fact that we've talked about this before in previous episode about the fact that there's a plant disparity awareness. Some people don't really pay attention to plants but having someone who was that passionate about trees as well, and I find trees amazing but very often we, again, we forget them, and they become a bit background. So I thought that was really cool and so hearing about the person who inspired him as well, and about how she was this advocate for trees, I thought was super interesting.

Sofia: Definitely. And I loved the comparison to the Lorax as well.

Julia: Yeah, that was great hearing that she had that term coined from Nat Geo. I mean, it's just inspiring to see every episode we hear about different people in different parts of the world. And I just love that we can never predict what a guest is going to say to these questions. So that's what I really love about it.

Sofia: Well, that seems like a really good place to end.

We hope you enjoyed this episode. If you have any thoughts or reactions, you can send us a voice note at podcast@conservationoptimism.org, or reach us on Twitter at [@ConservOptimism](https://twitter.com/ConservOptimism).

Julia: This episode was produced and edited by Sofia Castelló y Tickell and myself, Julia Migné. And our theme song was composed and produced by Matthew Kemp.

Sofia: Our transcripts are available thanks to the help of Alexandra Davis.

Julia: And this season of Good Natured was funded by Synchronicity Earth, the Whitley Fund for Nature, and the University of Oxford Departmental Public Engagement with Research Seed Fund.