

Paul Kirtley's Blog

Wilderness Bushcraft • Survival Skills • Outdoor Life

The Paul Kirtley Podcast Episode 004: Tristan Gooley And The Beauty Of Natural Navigation

Paul: This is the Paul Kirtley Podcast, episode four.

Voice Over: The Paul Kirtley Podcast. Wilderness bush craft, survival skills and outdoor life.

Paul: Hello and welcome to episode four of my podcast. And in this episode I have another very special guest, it's Tristan Gooley the natural navigator. He's a writer and a navigator. He set up his Natural Navigation school in 2008 and he's the author of the award-winning Natural Navigator which was published in 2010 and the bestselling Walkers' Guide to Outdoor Clues and Signs which was out in 2014. These are only the two books covering natural navigation and we'll talk a bit more about that when Tristan and I talk. He's the author of several other books as well. He's been quite a busy guy, he wrote the Natural Explorer which was published in March 2012 and he's also written a book called How to Connect with Nature, which was out early last year, early in 2014.

He's also written for many publications including The Sunday Times and The Financial Times and New York Times and he is also featured on television and radio programs. And prior to becoming a well-known author on Natural Navigation, Tristan led expeditions in five different continents, he's climbed mountains in many different places including Europe, Africa and Asia, and he has also got quite a sailing career behind him as well. He's also a pilot and he is the only living person to have both flown solo and sailed singlehandedly across the Atlantic. And it is my pleasure to welcome Tristan to my podcast. Hi, Tristan.

Tristan: Hi Paul.

Paul: How are you doing today?

Tristan: Yeah, good. You?

Paul: Yes, I'm very well. Thank you. I'm very well. Thank you. Now we're recording this in the winter and I guess it's a time that maybe fewer people are out and about in nature. But I thought it would actually be a great time of year to talk to you because I know personally there's a lot of things to still see in out and about in nature, and I know that's been a feature of your recent books. Really particularly, I think as they've become more popular, you've become more noted by people who enjoy nature in general, haven't you? Rather than just maybe people who are sort of natural navigation nerds, if we could term them that way.

Tristan: Yeah, I teach and write books for, and give talks to, quite a wide group of people. At one end, there's what some people might see as the hardcore from sort of survivalists to the military. What I sometimes, with a bit of a smile, refer to is the knife between the teeth crowd. And at the other end, it's anybody who enjoys the outdoors and is just looking for another layer of understanding, a deep connection, things that you can notice that the person next to you might not, that sort of thing.

Paul: So your latest book, am I right in thinking that's The Walkers Guide to Outdoor Clues and Signs? You've been quite prolific recently; you've put a few books out relatively recently?

Tristan: Yeah, well, like I suppose a few people, possibly like yourself. You're outdoors because you love it and you build up this knowledge and I'd, for decades, I've been building this knowledge and using it and enjoying it without a great sense of it leading anywhere. And then I got to the point where I

was teaching people informally and then that became formal. I set up my Natural Navigation School. And then I got approached to write and so there was actually quite a backlog of stuff, you know, burning to get out. and instead of teaching you know one or two people, or on occasion 20 people, it became talks to quite a large numbers and then books to tens of thousands which has been a... it's been a fun ride.

Paul: Yeah, I mean, your latest book has been a Sunday Times Bestseller and I noticed that you've said on your... I think it was on your website, that Amazon had sold out, and you're on sixth reprint of that book now, is that right?

Tristan: Yeah, I think it's going into the seventh, as we speak. And it's been very satisfying because as you all know it's one thing to sell a book because you're on daytime TV all day every day. It's a different thing for a book to sell well a) about the outdoors and b) driven largely by knowledge. I do bits on radio and the occasional bit on TV. But people buy my books not because they've gotten used to seeing [inaudible 00:04:51] on TV but because, hopefully, the word is spreading that there's some good stuff in them.

Paul: Yeah, and there is, I mean, I personally really enjoy your books.

Tristan: Thanks.

Paul: You're welcome, they're excellent. And then one of the things I noticed, I think one of the reviews about your latest book was that, page for page, it was one of densest set of knowledge about nature they've read in a long time. Did it take you a long time to write that book to get all of that condensed into a single volume?

Tristan: There's a really pretentious answer to this question [inaudible 00:05:24] because it makes me life laugh even if it doesn't make anyone else laugh. I heard this story that Picasso - and no I'm not comparing myself to Picasso - but Picasso got asked. He was sitting at a restaurant having a meal and he got asked if he'd do a scribble on a bit of paper and so he did that, and then before he handed it back to the person who asked him he said something like that will be \$10,000 please. And the person said, "What? That only took you a few seconds," and he said, "No, that took me 40 years to do it."

And so I've always thought that about anyone. I'm not referring to myself specifically here. But anyone who shares their knowledge through a book is... even if the book only takes a couple of years to write. If it's a worthwhile book there's got to be 20 years or more in it. So the big question for me is where does that process start. And for me personally it probably started as you know seven or eight-year old looking at a hill and thinking it might be more fun at the top than the bottom.

Paul: So has the success of your latest book, did it take you by surprise or was it aimed at a wider audience? Because as an outside observer, I mean, the first, I got your first book *The Natural Navigator* pretty soon after it came out and that seemed to be aimed at people who are interested in natural navigation. And then as your books have progressed, they seemed to have been accepted by a wider audience which, as you say, must very, you know, it's very gratifying for you. But was that a conscious decision to try and get your message out to a wider audience?

Tristan: I write entirely about the things that are getting me excited at that phase. I mean, there's a courtship with the publisher. They have to sort of say, "We think we can sell this to a quite a lot of people," and you have that discussion of course. But it's a huge amount of work and I do think I worked harder at my books than one or two I might have read, not mentioning any names. So by the time a book comes out I am absolutely exhausted in every possible way and so I'd be lying if I said, "Oh, I'd quite happy to know that one or two people are reading it." You know to make a living in the outdoors, as you will know better than most, is it's tough in time terms. You know, I put in so many hours and years in to these things.

And the most important thing is that I'm happy with the book and I feel it's really doing justice to the subject that I've been passionate about. But then I'd be lying if I didn't say I have hopes for it because the sheer exhaustion involved in creating it means you want to feel... I mean, becoming a bestseller is nice. It sort of makes you feel that the hard works been worthwhile. But actually it's... quite a lot of the satisfaction comes from the groups of people whose opinion you respect, giving you feedback as well,

and you'll be familiar with this from your blog and things like that. You can get a hundred nice messages and that's a nice feeling but if you get one or two from people whose opinion you really rate, that can be worth just as much...

Paul: Indeed, yes.

Tristan: Yes, and that's been very rewarding.

Paul: Good, good. The reason I asked that question really was sort of in the middle of, I think, *The Natural Navigator* and *The Natural Explorer* were sort of well-marketed. They were certainly, you know, you sort of saw them in Waterston's and you saw them in Cotswold's and places. The one that I think probably passed me by, compared to the others, was your book *How to Connect with Nature*. And so I wondered then, hence my previous question, were you going for a more kind of populist tack that was...? Because there's a very nice message in that book I think and on your website. I've got it, the quote here. You've said, "In this book I've tried to show how there is at least one practical and fundamental skill that will appeal to each of us depending on our background, culture and interest. We can choose from natural navigation, natural medicine, foraging, tracking out of many other things and it's through these simple skills that we first learn to see the natural world properly."

And that's something that completely resonates with me, Tristan, so it was really nice to read that. I'd be interested to know what motivated you to write that book. Was it for a particular organization? Because the format of the book and the cover and everything's quite different to some of your other books.

Tristan: Of an organization called *The School of Life* who teamed up with the well-known publishers *McMillan*. And they were bringing out a second series of six books about all sorts of topics and it's a very... its pitched to a very different readership to most of my books, but this third-party had sort of put some feelers out there and said, "We don't want just another nature book by somebody who is, perhaps, going to talk about..." You know? I mean, the image they probably had in their mind going from our conversations was a book for bird lovers. Quite often there was a very urban approach to a lot of the other books, and I think when they thought of nature, they thought, well, you get a pair of binoculars and you look at birds and that's that.

So I actually went to great lengths to help them say, "Right. We're going to come at this from a very different angle." And the... probably the expression that motivates a lot of my work, but not least that book, is if you point to something outdoors, I always challenge myself before I point something out to anybody, whether it's in a talk or a book or anything else, with the question, "So what?" So, I mean, you could point to any plant, and this is a mistake all of us make even when we've got a lot of experience teaching and that sort of thing, is you can point something because it excites you. And you can go, "Oh, look at that white dead nettle. Isn't it beautiful?" And anybody from age sort of five to 105 is well within their rights to go, "So what? It's just not doing anything for me."

Paul: Yes.

Tristan: But, I mean, I like that particular example because kids can identify stinging nettles and if you show them a white dead nettle, which is very easy to identify with its white flowers compared to the stingy nettle without the white flowers, and you say, "That one will sting you. That one won't." A lot of kids go - the so what disappears - and they go, "Okay." So that's not practical in the sense of, you know, it's not a survival tip. I mean, the identification part is arguably, but it's more... you know, particularly to kids they go, "All right." Well, as a 10-year old boy pretending you're putting a hand bravely into a bunch of nettles and you're the only person in the gang and actually you're not stung, suddenly they go, "Okay," that's not a so what, that's a, "I can see what it's worth identifying that plant that..."

Paul: Yeah, I can use that. Yeah.

Tristan: Yeah, I can use that. Exactly. Exactly.

Paul: It's nice. And I've seen a few things recently, there seems to be a rise of people being concerned about nature deficit disorder if... I don't know if that's actually been medically defined or not, but it's a

word that's become more inter popular parlors, hasn't it? Because there seems to be a growing eco-therapy movement where there's an attempt to try and get people reconnected with nature. Are you finding that those sort of people are using your work as well or...?

Tristan: Yeah, I'm... again the question "so what" comes straight in to my mind though, because I think if somebody's not converted to the idea that being outdoors and in nature is rewarding in itself, I don't think you convert many people by telling them that it's rewarding. I just don't think you do, in my experience. And I'm a bit of a post and gamekeeper in my sort of teens and 20s. I was trying to get up higher things faster across oceans and do that sort of stuff, and if somebody was talking about nature I was thinking, green stuff tends to get in my way, you know. It was only when I started to realize and so I feel I'm quite a good advocate for people and I quite like it when I... if I'm leading a group of, let's say 10 people on a walk, quite often there'll be one or two other "hards" who've been dragged along and you spot them quite quickly and you have been there...

Paul: Yeah, I've been there.

Tristan: Yeah, I'm sure you have. And to me it's a great challenge because they're sort of going, "Right. Well, I'll be owed one by my other half at the end of this," and I zero in on them without them realizing it and I go, "I'm going to have you within three hours. You're going love this stuff."

Paul: Yes.

Tristan: And what I'm doing is I'm keeping an ear out for what they're talking about. So, as most people in the group hopefully are really enjoying, you know learning how they can... you know, the 19 different ways you can use a tree to navigate. These other people sometimes strike up a conversation, and my ears sometimes trying to, you know, without losing the thread, I'm trying to listen. And if they talk about food, for example, I go, "Okay, let's... you know, I'm not the world's greatest forager but I've been outdoors enough that I love it and I enjoy it." And so I think right, okay, well, the next time we pass something a bit unusual in that area we'll bring that in and I'll just watch their reaction and that it is. Yeah, it's a... that part of teaching is a game. It's good fun.

Paul: Yeah, it is. It is absolutely. It is absolutely. Good fun. And, yeah, just getting people interested and knowing, as you say, identifying which buttons you can press to actually draw them in a bit more and you know, because you're actually you are just then addressing their main interest, aren't you? If you can pick up on this person is interested in wild food, or this person is interested in flowers in particular, or whatever it is, then you can hone in on that and try and help them expand their knowledge. So, yeah, I completely see that.

So you started... let's just go back to beginning of the books because to me it seemed quite a brave thing to put out a book on natural navigation. To my knowledge there weren't many books. The one that springs to mind is the Harold Gatty book but that was written decades ago. And there weren't many books after that I can think were particularly specifically about natural navigation. You might have had a general navigation book that might have had a little bit of natural navigation in there. But what motivated you to sort of sit down one morning and start writing a book on natural navigation? Did that feel like a risky enterprise, or did you - as you say write about things you love. But what was the real key motivation for you to sit down and write a book?

Tristan: There were several steps, none of which were part of any grand strategy. I think when anybody does anything that has a degree of success, everybody including themselves, has a temptation to go, "Well, that was where we're aiming," but that wasn't what happened. I really enjoyed navigation long before I even understood what the word navigation meant. You know, I was very much enjoying the process of going, "Right. I am here I want to get there and I want to be the person who shapes that journey." I've always been the person who's been frustrated by following. You know, I have to switch of completely. I'm actually... it sounds like I'd be a nightmare to be led on a walk, but actually I'm quite good because it's the same on a boat.

You're either skipper or you're crew, and as long as you know which you are, and I have to flip a switch and go, "Okay, I'm now following," and I have to slightly resist the temptation to try and shape a journey at all, otherwise it becomes frustrating. But that's, as a young kid, that's what I was doing and the hills became mountains. And what I found, the really shaping force for me, was that the journeys,

you know, by the time I was 30, I was taking on some quite ambitious journeys, and the irony was they were bigger, bolder and more adventurous, more dangerous than the stuff I was doing as a 10-year old.

Paul: Yeah, sorry to interrupt but for the benefit of some of my listeners who maybe don't know that background, would you... because I mean they are quite amazing some of things that you did in those days. Would you like to maybe just outline what they were that kind of got you to the point where you had this, I guess, repertoire of navigational skills that you've actually used on very big journeys?

Tristan: Yeah, yeah, by all means. As I mentioned, the sort of hills got bigger but they only got big to the point where I was still fully in control of the navigation. So a good example is, I went up Kilimanjaro in a holiday from University when I was 19 or 20, and that was the last I had of any interest in altitude actually, because I realized once you start going above that, unless you're an out and out, you know, technical pioneer, you end up following somebody else's route, which was very much the case on Kilimanjaro. I mean, by law you have to have a guide for employment reasons and things like that. But so I found, at that point, that actually the enjoyment wasn't going up as the altitude went up. So I stuck to the mountains where I felt I was actually going to be able to shape the journey entirely. And sometimes it went well, sometimes it went very badly, and I got very badly lost on 14,000-foot active volcano in Indonesia.

But that was sort of the limit for me in terms of where I felt I could genuinely be picking the route myself. And then the little messing about in little dinghies, the boats got a little bit bigger, the ponds became lakes, the lakes became oceans. And the sort of thing I would do, I was working full-time in travel up until about eight years ago, and the sort of thing I used to do about 12 years ago, say, is booking a couple of weeks holiday from work, tell my wife I was going to play golf, which she knew was a lie because I don't play golf. And then I tried to get from the South Coast of England to the summit of North Africa and back without buying a ticket. So it was little boat journeys, little aircraft journeys, trekking up to the summit route [inaudible 00:19:02] and back.

And then this built towards flying solo and then sailing singlehandedly across the Atlantic, which took seven years of... whilst doing a lot of other things, and took seven years of preparation and planning. And was the sort of culmination and it sort of comes back to your original question of, "Why the natural navigation," because the irony was by the time I was crossing the Atlantic solo in a plane and a small boat I'd realized, I'd committed to myself to doing it so I carried it through, but I'd realized, you know, perhaps four or five years before actually doing it, that I could have as much fun trying to find my way for a mile or two across the woods using trees as my compass as I could 10,000 feet above the North Atlantic staring at the latest electronic navigation equipment in the world. So it was a kind of flip.

I'd been interested in it for decades. I think the book you mentioned, Harold Gatty's book, was what I knew almost by heart perhaps 15 years ago. And it's... I personally feel it's a really exciting time in any outdoor person's experience when they realize that scale of what you're doing does not correlate with satisfaction or fun. And it's really nice for me now because I've got two kids, they're 10 and seven, both boys and I genuinely have as much fun doing a sort of two-hour thing in the woods with them as I did, as a 25-year old in the jungle somewhere. So I could go on and on, but all these pieces sort of came together and it was just a very exciting realization. There was no exact moment when it happened but it happened fairly, fairly sort of steadily and fairly strongly. And now people say to me, "Where is the most exciting place you'd like to go?" Well, it's the place with the most variety and the most life.

So whilst I've spent time in deserts and fair few remote regions, I do think, whilst deserts are very exciting when you go to them for the first time and you get extremely excited when you spot a plant of any kind, it makes you come back to your home patch with renewed excitement and passion because you realize that in a few square meters in Britain or Europe, you've just got a feast of opportunities. And there's an opportunity for almost anything you could be interested in. We've talked about foraging, but I mean, the idea that every little plant is trying to tell you something, it's trying to make a map for you, it's trying to give you a compass directions, and all sorts of other wonderful things as well. I mean, that our back garden is absolutely rich with opportunity.

Paul: Yeah, and I guess it's about awareness, isn't it? Once you become aware that all of those things are trying to show you something, information there, then there is more to fascinate you there than ever I think. and I've certainly... I remember when I was learning more about wild foods when I was

younger, and I went back to an area where I'd played a lot as a kid up in the north east, out in the country side. There's a place we used to go to sort of between two farms there was a little gild with a stream running through it, and nothing ever happened in there and so we used to come and play hide-and-seek in there.

And I remember going back there and finding pignuts and all sorts of things, which I hadn't noticed when I was used to play there as a kid because I didn't know what they were, but then when I went back, I was like, "Oh, my goodness. There's all these things that are here." So as soon as you become aware of the possibilities and aware of the information that's there, you suddenly... there's a whole new world opened up to you and it's...

Tristan: Yeah, absolutely. A different lens and I think we can all... is what I like to do is sort of take a different lens with us on each trip outdoors. Because when you're new to any area it's very hard to take it all in on one go. So it's something... a little trick I've used for years is to stick one particular book in my backpack when I go out, and I quite often I don't even look at it. But it's sort of reminding me the things not to overlook. So it might be a book about trees, it might be a book about wildflowers but it just helps me, if I'm just saying, "Right, I'm going to just keep my focus in this area," and then the lovely thing is you do that in lots of different areas, and you don't lose those different abilities. It means the next time you go out, you notice the tree and you notice the wildflower that you wouldn't have otherwise.

It's like practicing anything. If you think of perhaps a football player, you know they'll practicing, their sprinting one day, and their fitness the next day, and the dribbling the day after that, and then it comes to the match, all these things come together hopefully. And I think it's the same for us outdoors people. We shouldn't try and do it all in one day. We just sort of shape one bit one day and then the pieces come together.

Paul: Yeah, absolutely. I'm thinking, as you're saying that, I'm thinking to some of the things that I teach on courses, and whether it's from just even basic tree and plant identification. I'm often surprised at how many people these days don't really know how to identify even many of our native trees. and once you start to get them to recognize them, the woods stop being a bunch of tree, green stuff and bark, and things that they can't differentiate between. And they start seeing the individual species, and particularly, and again it resonates to what you were saying before about the... you know, what I teach is largely about how you can use these things, and how they're useful resources, as well as how you can interpret the way they're growing and what have you.

But you have that... they have that connection with them, they go, "Oh, yeah. Okay, right. Well, that's a Silver Birch and I understand that I can use it for fire lighting, and I can use the bark for making containers," and they have that connection with and they start seeing them as useful resources, and they start seeing them as useful individual things, and it is starting to see those individuals. And then you start teaching people about tracking, and they suddenly start seeing all the animal tracks and signs that are around. And, as you say, it is a different lens while you're training in it, but then when you go for a walk in the woods, you're seeing all of these things. Some of my students who have come and learnt tracking that they say it's almost an affliction. They can no longer go for a walk with their wife without boring them to death looking at deer sign or what have you.

Tristan: I get that. That's one of the... it's fun to hear you say that, because that's one of the most common compliments I get, is people emailing me saying, "I'm completely addicted. My other half is been driven up the wall." I mean, yeah, the reviews of the books quite often sort of say that. They say, you know, "Warning." And I start a lot of the talks I give, I actually I start with a line, "Over the next hour, I'm going to attempt to change the way you see the world forever," and that's true. I mean, I'm not trying to change it completely, people can still go about their normal lives but once you've shown somebody that you can find north or south looking at the shape of tree branches, and that resonates for them, you know, yeah, they do look at trees differently, or so they tell me.

Paul: Yeah, well, there's no going back, is really, once you've learned that, once you understand that that information is there. And I think, do you find that people are surprised that you can do that, do people generally not know that you can even do that, or do they just not know how to do that?

Tristan: It's been interesting because The Natural Navigator did quite well, and this last books are

doing very well. I'm in an interesting situation now, where when I started my courses seven years ago, when I started doing this full-time, I should, say seven years ago. I could be very, very relaxed about how I presented information because I was very, very confident that I was the only person in the room that knew any of it. I've now got this strange situation where I run courses, and a few of the people on the course - obviously because they love the subject, and if they love the subject the chances are they've read the books. So I have this interesting thing where some of the information is. But I'm not saying everything in my book is original, but quite a lot of what I do is take information that perhaps exists but has never been presented to somebody in... I mean a good example would be, for example, tree routes.

Everybody. You know if you ask somebody to draw a tree the first thing they're quite often to do is draw a symmetrical tree. Symmetrical trees don't exist, and once you've explained that to people, you go, "So why are they a symmetrical?" And then you're into using light and wind to find your way. Another... you know, the example I was going to give is, I'd noticed for a good few years that tree routes weren't symmetrical, and on my courses I say to people, I say, you know, "If you're in a tent in a moderately exposed area and the wind picks up, what's the first thing you do?" And Londoners say, "Well, you go indoors." No, no, they don't. But, you know, most people say, "Oh, you tighten the guide ropes and you put a few more pegs out." I go, "Okay, well, that's what the trees are doing."

But, you know, the reason I'm so confident in that is partly because I've noticed it over many years, and partly because I've gone out there and looked whether anybody else noticed it. And the people who quite often notice it are not outdoors people, they're not survivalists, they're not naturalists. In this case it was foresters.

Paul: And tree surgeons may be as well.

Tristan: Yeah, exactly. So the information is there. I make an observation, I go and look to see if whether my observation has been spotted by anybody else, and quite often it has, so what I'm doing is marrying, perhaps, researching in forestry with a navigation interest and presenting information that technically existed before but to a new audience.

Paul: So that's a kind of synthesis of your observations plus more, I guess, niche...

Tristan: Yeah.

Paul: ...interest and research. Yeah, which is sort of the best way of getting information out to people. isn't it? I mean it's a...

Tristan: Yeah.

Paul: ... very valid form of bringing information to the fore for people.

Tristan: Yeah.

Paul: Interesting, interesting. What do people find the most surprising when you're teaching them about natural navigation? What do people consistently say, "Wow, I never knew that." Or, "Really?" Or what really takes them by surprise?

Tristan: It's quite often the philosophy, the fact that I'm so, so passionate about it. I generally take the view that everything outdoors can be used to help navigate, even if it's in a very vague sense. So, quite often, if I'm following a structured course, I'll teach them certain things, and there'll be one or two things. Quite often anything that, and you'll know this from your experience, that people do that tends to get the strongest. So if you point something and give somebody some information they quite often they like it. If I get people to feel two sides of a stone on a cloudy day and they notice the temperature difference, and then they work out for themselves that that must be caused by the sun even though they can't see the sun, and then they go, "Okay, so the sun is in the southern part of the sky. So, me, touching this rock is somehow giving me some idea of direction." So that interactivity really works.

But it's quite often me saying to people on walks, "Pick anything you want at any point over the next few hours, and I'll try and find a clue in it to help us navigate." And because then they realize that it's

not that I've picked 50 things that are over a three-mile route or something, it's... genuinely apples, and at that point I think the penny really sinks because they go, "Okay." So a lot of plants and a lot of animals can give us direction, but every single plant, every single animal through an understanding of ecology is making a map of some sort for us. You know, very simple examples like beech trees are telling us that the soil is not water logged. Whereas willows are giving us a clue we might be getting close to that stream...

Paul: Yes.

Tristan: Two much, much more subtler examples like the behavior of butterflies and that sort of thing that can start to paint quite a subtle map for us.

Paul: Do you find that people, I mean, as you say, you've spent most of life sort of tuning in to these cues and then I guess you've taken an increased interest as it's become more central to your outdoor life, and certainly I know, personally speaking, when you start teaching things it sharpens your focus even more. Do you find, now that you're at a point where you know you just mentioned sort of behavior of butterflies, and people suddenly kind of go, "Oh, my God. I'm never going to be able to learn all of this"? I mean, how do you strip it back for people so that, "Okay, well, these are the building blocks that you need to know and then you can go from there"? What would be the sort of building blocks that you would say to people, "These are the things that you should try and learn first"? Or do you try and take a more holistic approach?

Tristan: Yes, and the first thing I do is dispel the notion that natural navigation is married to big expeditions. And I actually, you know, I'm proud of some of the expeditions I've done, but I'm much prouder of the knowledge that's relevant close to home. So I travel great distances sometimes so that other people don't have to, so that that knowledge can help somebody on their Sunday walk even if it's the 10-minute walk with the dog. You can bring some of the knowledge I got in Borneo back into that. But to answer your question more simply, I say to everybody in talks and courses, I say that the question I want them to leave with is, "Which way I am looking?" Because that's the start. I mean, realistically the idea that people are going to go out there and go on dedicated natural navigation walks is very rare. But everybody can look out of a window and go, "Which way am I looking?" And then use whatever appeals to them, whether it's the sun, moon, stars, wind, plants, animals, buildings, all of these things can give them some answer. And if they get it wrong, it doesn't matter. It's a fun puzzle and that's the best way to start, and then you just build on that.

Paul: So in terms of somebody's listening to this podcast, they're interested in natural navigation, apart from going out and buying your books obviously, what should they be doing? If they actually want to progress and develop a knowledge of being able to navigate by natural signs, what would you suggest people concentrated on?

Tristan: Well I'd encourage everybody the next time they're outdoors to have a go at the two broad parts of natural navigation. So that's establishing direction, so north, south, east, west and that can be as simple as, "Which way am I looking?" And if you're actually on a walk and you've got a map and compass, or GPS, or iPhone, or whatever it is you're used to using, you can carry on using that, but what I'd encourage is before you go to one of those bits of kit for reference and that feeling of security that all walkers like understandably, Just chuck in the five-second test yourself. Before I look at the compass, I'm going try and work it out, and if I'm wrong it doesn't matter.

And then there's the second whole area which is it comes back to this ecology thing. And really, really fundamental, fun, easy exercise for everyone to do is either design a walk with this in mind or wait until a walk you're doing any way touches this sort of thing, is go from an area next to water by a river, by a lake through a slightly higher area that's not got any standing water there, and then drop down to... I mean, really you only need to go up a couple of meters before water gets a lot scarcer, so we're not talking about climbing mountains through this. You just... it can be a very short walk. You go from wet to dry to wet, and the challenge is to see if you can spot, when you're getting close to the wet area from the plants, and if you're lucky the animals, because that's the start of the map making using nature and it's really... people will think that's difficult, but as soon as you stop and you go, "Okay, we've got a lot of splashes of purple here. We've got some, you know...."

Even if you can't, and most people can't identify them, it doesn't matter. You just go, "Oh, we've got

some purple flowers." You don't need to know if it's Himalayan Balsam or anything like that. You just go, "There seems to be a lot of splashes of purple here," and then you walk away from the water, and that purple disappears. And then suddenly in the distance you pick up that hint of purple, and you go, "I wonder," and then when you get there you realize, I mean, the trees will give you even more big signs, even bigger signs. But when you spot those little things, I think, for a lot of people that's a very exciting moment. It's when they go, "This isn't rocket science," and I think that's the beginning of quite a fun journey with natural navigation.

Paul: Yeah, and I think in some ways that's more of a natural way of doing it. And that there is no pun intended there. Because I think we do tend to get hung up, or we as a society I think, tend to get hung up on the technical knowledge being kind of an intermediate step, like you say, you have to know that it's Himalayan Balsam, or you have to know that that's oppositely golden saxifrage or something that indicates that it's wet. But you don't, you just need to recognize the association and that's it. You don't need to know what the plant is, you don't need to know what it's called, you don't need to know its Latin name, you don't need to know that it's a native species or not you. You just have to notice the association and it's backed to very, I guess, very fundamental science in a sense in terms of just being inquisitive about nature.

Tristan: Yeah, absolutely. I actually, in a few of my books, I make the point that it's not about names because all of us come across naturalists, and there's a rather, I think, slightly sad tradition that natural history and this sort of thing, is all about identification. And in the early days, if somebody goes to a new place and they're only there for a couple of weeks, then the people back home are going to want to know what's there and it kind of makes sense to, in the old days, they used to collect everything, didn't they? But they identified it the very least. But what I say to people is, for your own personal enjoyment and use, you never need to know the name of anything really. It accelerates your learning because you can take shortcuts once you know the names of things. But if you make an observation, like the one we're talking about the color of flowers next to water, you can have that whole satisfaction without ever knowing the name of it.

I mean, I've used countless likens to navigate. I mean there are 15-16 thousand in the world. I know the names of... I regularly use half a dozen that I know the names of. But I have used dozens if not hundreds of more that I may never know the names of because they're in areas that I'm not that familiar with. But all I've done is I've spotted, perhaps they're thriving on the northwest side of an igneous rock as was the case in La Palma, and I was able to use them for a whole day, but I never learnt their name. I just got to know them and got to know their habitat and their preferences. And that's the way I approach it. I don't like people who think nature is all about names and it applies to every area. See, astronomy, how many people have been put off using the stars in a fun and practical way because they think it's all about memorizing the names of 2000 stars?

Paul: Yeah, yeah.

Tristan: You do need to recognize the odd shape. But you can call it what you want. You can call it the Pline, you can call it the Big Dipper. Every northern culture has its name for it. Which one is right?

Paul: Yeah, that's absolutely right. And I was about to mention that, about the nomenclature with plants as well. You go to different, even different European countries, they've all got different common names for the same species, and some of them are related because of the way that we've migrated in the past. But there are some that are quite distinctly different and then you go further afield and there are similar or same species with different languages used to describe them. It's the same plant, people have maybe same understanding of them but it's just the label that people have given it and the understanding is the fundamental thing.

Tristan: Yeah, and I'm totally with you on that. Every once in a while I come across somebody and I'm sort of saying that this is my view and they're saying, "Oh, but that's the beauty." And there's a lot of finger wagging that goes on at this point. That's the beauty of the Latin naming. I go, "Yeah, but, you know, the Tuarag in the Sahara and the Dayag in Borneo, their Latin's pretty weak and their plant knowledge will probably clean the floor with yours."

Paul: Yes, the most useful thing personally, I find, for the Latin names is simply when you're teaching somebody that's... for example, we get quite a few European people coming to Britain to do our

courses, and they might be from Austria or Germany or the Netherlands or wherever, and they would like to know what the Latin names are so they can go and look them up in their own language, field guides and what have you. That to me is practically the most useful thing of knowing the Latin names for some of the plants, because then you've got a common language. So you've got the Walkers Guide to Outdoor Clues and Signs which is proving very popular, very good. I also noticed that the Natural Navigator pocket guide slipped out as well.

Tristan: Actually, it came out, I think, the year after the hard back...

Paul: Did it really?

Tristan: Yeah, it's always sat in the background. I mean, it's sold. What's lovely about it is like a lot of authors. I do what I can to score independent bookshops and that book really helped independence, because it's at a price level where if people see it in a shop they think, "Well, I'll just pick that up rather than trying to save a few quid on Amazon."

Paul: Well, your books are... they're nice tactile experiences. Whoever's responsible, whether it's your publisher or whether you pushed for it or whoever, but they're nice books to hold, they're nicely designed and good quality. They do lend themselves to browsing in bookshops, don't they? They do lend themselves people go pick them up and think this is a nice solid book. It's slightly old fashion feel and they're nice things to have.

Tristan: Well, it's nice to get that feedback and I think I can't take credit for it. The publisher has invested in that area and I'm very grateful they have because one thing, you know, natural navigation is a beautiful subject and I personally find it very enriching and people who get into it, I think, get a lot out of it. But the one thing I will never argue is that it's essential to survive anymore. You know, we can get through life without it. And so whether it's my courses, or my books, or the talks, or anything I do together with the subject, I hope I come from viewpoint of kind of like, this is a choice people have to make to enjoy something, to feel enriched and satisfied by it. There's nothing that I can say that you know you're going to struggle to get through the next month without this. All I can say is that it's great fun and it's really enjoyable, and I think the fact the books are physically nice is sort of supporting that message that it's about having a better and more fun, more rewarding, more interesting life.

Paul: Indeed. And plans for the coming year? Do you have any more books in the offering, any more writing or are you taking a break from that somewhat masochistic exercise?

Tristan: My publisher and my agent are jumping up and down and rubbing their hands and getting very excited about the next book, and I've got some good ideas, but the Walkers Guide to Outdoor Clues and Signs was so intensive to get all of that into a hopefully enjoyable and readable package, was such an exercise that I'm quite happy not think about books for a month or two. But I suspect there will be another at some point.

Paul: And just out of interest, as writer, do you tend to try and write as you go? Do you try and sit down and do a bit every day? Or do you sort of... are you a kind of crammer in terms of writing stuff?

Tristan: I'm all or nothing and absolutely everything. I can't write casually. So I tend to research intensively and then look at that intensively and then go away from it intensively and walk up a mountain or something, and then come back and write intensively, and then edit intensively, and take breaks from all of those things. I'm not... I think I'd find it less exhausting if I could sort of do a few hours every day for a couple of years. But I'm not like that by character. And I don't think there's any point trying to change it.

Paul: No, no I guess not. I can understand that. I find it difficult not to be completely immersed and think once you get interested in something and once you get the bit between your teeth, I find it very difficult not to be, as you say, all are nothing as it becomes all encompassing. So I can understand that. Good. So anything else we should be looking out for from you, Tristan, in the coming months?

Tristan: Have a browse of my website to check if there are any events near you. There's a talks and events page and, yeah, I'm trying to get around the country and spread the natural navigation sort of fun message hopefully. So, maybe, I'm giving a talk up the road from you at some point over the next few

months.

Paul: And where can people find your website, Tristan?

Tristan: It's www.naturalnavigator.com

Paul: Excellent. Okay. Thank you. And there's some really nice resources on there as well, aren't there? Some, you know, with respect to the sun and the moon and stars and what have you.

Tristan: Yeah, I've broken the subject down into each area because that's one of the lovely things about natural navigation, is people who find the stars fascinating are not always the way some people who find plants and animals fascinating, and so you can come at it from quite often what people do is they go, "Okay, so the sun is due south in the middle of the day. I can get my head around that. That's not too bad. What else is the sun doing?" And before they know, they're reading about the shape of plants related to that little fact and getting into it. So I've tried to make it easy for people to get into the subject via the website and, you know, there's hundreds and hundreds of bits and pieces on there. I'm very honest, I've saved the best stuff for the books but there's an awful lot of really good stuff on the website to sort of get you up and running. And then if you want to take it to the next step then the books are the best place.

Paul: Yeah, I completely vouch for that. I find it... it's a very nice website, it's very nicely put together. I actually send some of my assistants over to your website to have a look at the basic stuff on the sun and the moon, the stars, and just so they get a basic understanding of the natural navigation elements. So, yeah, it's a very useful resource. I'd highly recommended anybody go over that's got an interest and go and have a look at that definitely.

Tristan: Thanks, Paul.

Paul: Good, Tristan. Well, thank you very, very much for taking time out of your day to talk to me. It's really, really good to hear from you, good to speak and I hope people get your latest book.

Tristan: Good time of year to be reading outdoor books.

Paul: Absolutely. Absolutely. And there's still lots to go out and see as well. It's a good time, some good walks to be had. I think walking off the Christmas pudding with a natural navigation lens, I think.

Tristan: Great, great time of year for the odd night walk as well.

Paul: Absolutely. Absolutely. I look forward to seeing more interesting stuff come out from you in future. Keep up the good work. It's really appreciated. Thank you.

Tristan: Cheers. Thanks a lot for having me, Paul.

Paul: Cheers, Tristan. Take care. Cheers.

Tristan: Bye, now.

Paul: Thanks again to Tristan for joining me and it was fantastic talking to him about his passion for natural navigation and his clear passion for sharing that with as many people as possible, both in person and through his books, and I highly recommended that you pick them up.

Thanks also to you for listening. It's much appreciated as always. Thank you for joining me, thank you for making it to the end of episode four of the Paul Kirtley Podcast. If you'd like to let me know what you think, you can leave a comment on my blog at paulkirtley.co.uk. Or you can tweet me @pkirt, that's @P-K-I-R-T. Always interested to hear from you. I'd love to know what you thought about what Tristan and I talked about.

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