

Earth as Inspiration:

Connecting Art and Geology

Welcome to Earth Matters – Field notes on the geology of New Mexico’s enchanting landscapes.

In 1979 David Attenborough presented a 13-part series ‘Life on Earth’. In his book, which has travelled all over the world with me is a picture of a striking rattlesnake. It hooked me and lured me to New Mexico where the mountains, canyons and desert landscapes have inspired artists from the first Native American dwellers to the present time. My own earliest childhood memories are wrapped up in rugged mountains and lush alpine meadows brimming with wildflowers, riots of pinks, yellows, blues and purples. My curiosity led me to ask how ancient purplish red sandstone monoliths came to lay on top of convoluted colorful metamorphosed sediments and gneisses. What forces within the earth had buried sediments at the surface only to thrust them upwards into twisted, convoluted mountain ranges?

These were the questions I asked as a teenager that led me to study earth science. But that was not enough for me. Even before I asked these questions I was photographing rocks and canyons, wildflowers and wildlife with my first Kodak instamatic camera at the age of thirteen. I collected wildflowers, identified them, and learnt their habitat.

In 1990, as a graduate student in New Mexico studying how ancient continents were formed I bought my first computer to analyze the chemistry of ancient rocks and with it came a whole new way to catalog and record my wildflower and wildlife images. And then the artist within took hold and I began to twirl my images into art that speaks of the places I visit, the wilderness I gaze upon and those still moments in time that touch my heart and make me glad to be a part of this amazing planet that I call home.

As David Attenborough once said, “It seems to me that the natural world is the greatest source of excitement; the greatest source of visual beauty; the greatest source of intellectual interest. It is the greatest source of so much in life that makes life worth living.”

Celebrating Earth Science Week, I’m Maureen Wilks, Emeritus Geologist with the Bureau of Geology at New Mexico Tech. If you want to see the intersection of nature and art visit my website mwtransformativeart.com.