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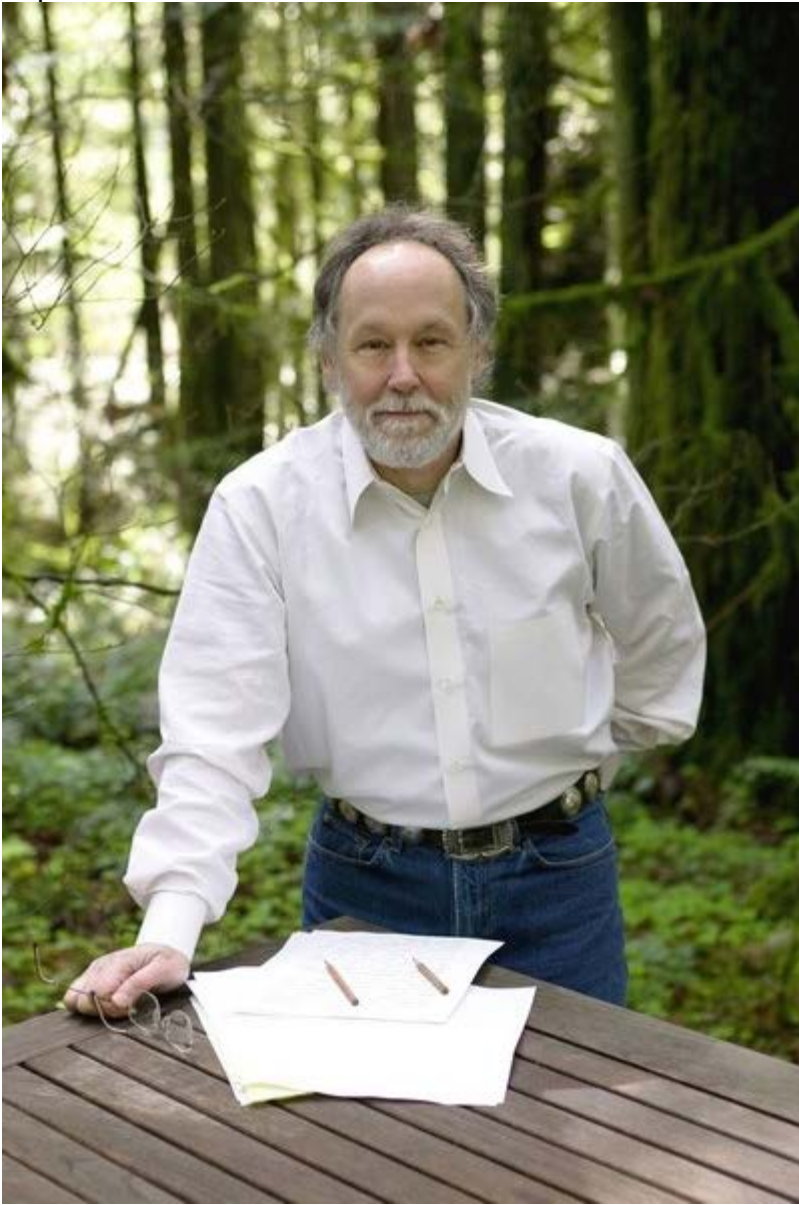
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National Book Award winner Barry Lopez to speak in Charleston for first time



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One of America's top nature writers, Barry Lopez will speak Thursday at The Charleston Museum. David Liittschwager

National Book Award-winner Barry Lopez, one of America's top nature writers, is selective when it comes to speaking engagements, accepting only four or five every year.

If you go

What: Award-winning author Barry Lopez's talk, "Conservation and the Human Community."

When: 7-10 p.m. Thursday

Where: The Charleston Museum, 360 Meeting St.

Cost: \$20 for adults. \$10 for students.

More: Tickets available at www.thecenterforbirdsofprey.org/Events.php or by calling 971-7474. Books by Lopez are available at Blue Bicycle Books store, 420 King St.

He said there's a good reason for that.

"Nobody needs to hear from me. I know that," said Lopez. "But I also don't think it's a good idea for a writer to be in public very often because if you do that, then you begin to think that you're important. And I think that can be the end of good writing."

Lopez, who will mark 50 years of published work this January, said the role of the writer is "to serve society."



Enlarge A selection of books by Barry Lopez is available at the independent Blue Bicycle Books store on King Street. David Quick/Staff

So why did he accept the invitation by the Birds of Prey Center to give a talk, "Conservation and the Human Community," at 7 p.m. Thursday at The Charleston Museum?

"It was just instinct," said Lopez.

"There was something about the tone of voice that came through. He (center founder and director Jim Elliott) approached my agent, but that tone of voice reached me. That's the first thing I look for in an invitation, not what someone will pay you. Who are these people and can you go there and help be of assistance."

Lopez's visit to Charleston will be his first and he will bring his wife, fellow writer Debra Gwartney. The couple collaborated on the editing of an anthology, "Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape," published in 2006.

Indirect local influence

Elliott was profoundly affected by Lopez's writing long before he founded the raptor center nearly 25 years ago.

"I bought my first Barry Lopez book, 'Of Wolves and Men,' in 1984 and it validated, for me, the intensity of feelings, reverence and curiosity I have felt for the natural world all my life," said Elliott, who, like Lopez, started out practicing nature photography.

Elliott said he had hoped to show people the importance of nature, its beauty and intricacy through photography, not direct advocacy or activism. He adds that Lopez manages to do so, "at 10 times the level," through his writing because Lopez immerses himself in landscapes and the cultures of those landscapes.

Elliott describes Lopez's writing as "spellbinding, profound and compelling without being overdone."

Thursday's talk, Elliott noted, is not considered to be a fundraiser for the Awendaw-based center, but rather an event for the community. The cost to attend is \$20 for adults and \$10 for students. A selection of Lopez' books are available at the independent Blue Bicycle Books store, 420 King St.

Not an activist

Lopez, who has written both fiction and nonfiction, won the National Book Award for Nonfiction for "Arctic Dreams" in 1986 and was a National Book Award finalist for "Of Wolves and Men" in 1978. Besides those awards, other honors include an Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a John Burroughs Medal and Guggenheim Fellowship.

The 70-year-old Lopez, interviewed via phone on Aug. 27, was still working on what he planned to say in Charleston.

"I don't have a canned talk of any sort. Everything starts from scratch," said Lopez. "When I received my message through my agent, I sort of had to come up with a title."

He anticipates his talk to look into the impulse that some people have to devote "enormous amounts of volunteer time and energy into conservation efforts all over the country."

"For me, the question is how does this benefit us and how does it affect the way we think of ourselves as a community. If we're making these strenuous efforts to preserve landscapes and ensure a future for wild animals, for example, are they then part of our community? And what kind of ethical obligations come along with that?"

One thing attendees can't expect Lopez to do is rally locals to fight climate change, rein in personal consumption or end trophy hunting of endangered African animals.

Dedicated to his art

"Sometimes there's an assumption that someone like me is plugged into what's trending, if you will. That's not the world that I live in. I live more in the world of my way of life, which is to write. That may sound strange. I have had the great fortune in my life to travel a lot and see a lot," says Lopez, who has visited 97 countries to date.

"I know that most people don't get to do that and the obligation I feel is that wherever I go I have to pay attention and come back and say as best as I can what I saw."

Lopez is adamant that he's not an activist or advocate, but rather an artist, no different from a sculptor, painter or composer. What they do and what he does are the same.

"We create patterns to allow people to explore for themselves what it is they want to do with their lives. I

don't want to organize people to accomplish one task. ... My effort is help people explore their own feelings and convictions."

And what happens if he doesn't lend his voice to activism?

"If you step back and say, well, supposing not many people decide to pay attention to global climate change, my answer to that is, 'Well, too bad for us.' I'm not going to beat on doors and change people's minds. That kind of work is not work I do. Others do that."

Trouble at home

But his influence may be more indirect. Lopez admits that he gets letters from people who were inspired to go into politics or change the way they do business after reading his books.

"What I'm doing is trying to help people imagine the life that people want to have and not the life that they've been told they should have. And that's the function of the arts in general: to help people understand what they mean in the world," said Lopez.

"You can't get anywhere by condemning business or capitalism, but you can approach each person to help them understand that they have a worthy contribution to make and that life conspires against us all. If we're not careful, (we can think) there's nothing we can do."

Lopez stands firm in not being a more direct activist even as he currently lives "in fear of fire everyday" at his home of 45 years on the west slope of the Cascade mountains in Oregon.

"The rivers are really low. There's not much water around and I live in a temperate zone rainforest with 110 inches of rain," said Lopez. "This (summer) is the driest, scariest summer with the lowest water in the rivers and this water is too warm. The spring Chinook in the mouth of the Columbia are dying because the water in the river is too warm."

- Keywords
- [Arctic Dreams](#)
- [Avian Conservation Center](#)
- [Barry Lopez](#)
- [Jim Elliott](#)
- [Of Wolves and Men](#)
- [The Center for Birds of Prey](#)



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