

Deforestation from a tree's perspective at the TED conference

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Ella Dawson experiences what it is like to be a tree in a rain forest faced with destruction in a virtual reality presentation at a TED Conference in Vancouver

A pair of filmmakers at the prestigious TED Conference used virtual reality to allow people to experience the ravages of deforestation—from the perspective of a tree.

A presentation Thursday simply titled "Tree" combined sound, sight,

smell and touch to let people feel first-hand what is lost when lush forest burns down.

"It was very real: At one point I was going to take the headset off and ask about the fire," TED attendee Elle Luna said after trying "Tree."

"Your thinking mind sort of stops and you just feel it all."

The experience gets underway when participants step onto a platform surrounded by tall, [potted plants](#).

Each person buries a seed symbolically in soil before donning [virtual reality](#) head gear and an interactive vest that squeezes or vibrates on cues.

From there, they virtually become the seed.

Looking down, roots are seen sprouting and the participants are transported by the smell of rich earth as they rise to the surface and break into sunlight on a [forest floor](#).

They grow to be tall [trees](#), with birds, monkeys and other creatures perching or climbing on arms transformed into long branches under a glorious sky.

Fans simulate wind. Heaters provide the illusion of the sun's warmth. The platform and interactive vest tremble as you grow or sway.

Then comes the sound and shake of engines and chainsaws. The smell of smoke, provided by a member of the 'Tree' team lighting a match in the real world, draws attention to a fire devouring the forest.

In the final moments, one becomes a virtual ash floating away. A seed

appears to float in the thick smoke in a parting hint of hope that life will start anew.

"It is the story of life and death of being," said one of the creators, Milica Zec.

"Everything is amazing until humans come to the forest, then we replace that with [forest](#) and everything is taken away from you."

Not wanting people to end "Tree" on too grim a note, they are given a real seed to plant along with information about how to connect with the Rainforest Alliance for ways to help fight deforestation.

Virtual reality lets film makers take audiences from being merely viewers to striking strong and memorable emotional chords by immersing them in stories, according to 'Tree' co-creator Winslow Porter.

"We are able to dissolve the screen; now you are the subject," Porter said.

"People leave and tell their friends they were a tree."

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