

Wilderness as Home Place

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Newfoundland's irrepressible John Crosby advanced a thought that merits deliberation: "Ten years ago we didn't know about environment," he said, "but now it's all around us!" It's true. Each of us is born, lives and is recycled in a marvellous surrounding environment that has been so un-sensed, so taken for granted, that until recently we have been unaware that it is all around us. Furthermore, we didn't really care.

Who worries that each fall the willow rings around prairie sloughs are fired, preparing the sites for ploughing if the succeeding year is dry? Who mourns the demise of scattered aspen bluffs smashed down by bulldozers in the winter when the green-wood is frozen, then windrowed for summer burning? Who laments the passing of the wild grasslands, skinned then engrafted with tame wheat and domesticated pasture?

Resistance to respecting the inherent worth of the natural world and protecting its diversity is deeply anchored in Western culture. The famous men we praise - the great theologians and philosophers, the eminent artists and scientists - with few exceptions shared one blind spot, one major intellectual defect. They knew practically nothing about the relationships of the human species to the Ecosphere. They conceived the Earth as resource not as source.

Read the sacred scriptures, study the works of the cultural giants, and an overpowering conclusion emerges. Only two relationships are important: that between Man and God, and that between Man and Man. The Man-Planet relationship is simply not recognized. At the most, Nature is seen as a providential provisioner. At the least, Nature is only a scenic backdrop on the stage where Man, proud Man, plays out his dramas.

Lest the gender-conscious protest that the other sex has been slighted by references only to Man, the masculine term is purposely used because the other blind spot of Western sages is precisely the feminine. They have paid as little attention to Woman as to the Ecosphere. As an extension of what was expected in their homes they projected an inert Nature, a passive Mother Earth, simply there to be husbanded. Today of course even husbandry is passe. We "manage the resource base optimally."

Nothing is to be gained by dwelling on the ignorance of our otherwise illustrious ancestors. That they were not great ecologists is regrettable, but for that they cannot be blamed. As little as four or five centuries ago, Europeans thought that the Earth was the centre of the solar system, and only in the last 50 years has suspicion dawned that things other than people may possess intrinsic values too. We, however, have been granted glimmerings of ecological insight, enough to know that the answers to current environmental woes will not be found in the pronouncements of the ancients. Theistic or

humanistic, but always homocentric, they speak to the human condition as it existed before 1950. They speak for a world that excluded the Real World.

Today we are in an entirely different game, recognizing a new supra-human partner--the Ecosphere, Gaia, the Natural World. We are trying to understand realities more important than people, trying to escape the exploitive macho approach that aims to rape and rip-off the non-humanized world, trying to learn the new symbiotic rules because the old ones are killing us--those that seemed to work so well when we were fewer in numbers and less powerful, before we equipped our selves with huge machines and appropriated massive pools of fossil fuels. Now we are struggling to understand what it might mean to become compliant cooperators with Earth's ecosystems, hitherto insensitively appropriated as our resources and our heritage. What monumental conceit! What egregious insolence!

Whether evolutionist or creationist, no one can deny that we are earthlings, out of Mother Earth and her moon rhythms, our bodies composed of the surface substances that lie ready at hand: star dust, humus, air and water. Notably we are not composed of heavy metals, radionuclides, petroleum hydrocarbons, nor any of those unnatural resources that we persist in digging out from underground to poison and pollute the planet and ourselves. Our make-up suggests that we should avoid such toxins as un-natural.

But what is our nature? It seems logical to assume that whatever our essence may be it somehow shares in that greater Nature from which and into which our species first came. We were born a wilderness primate and for eons lived by harvesting the sun on land and in water, foraging among the world's forests, grass lands, streams, lakes and seashores.

So the question, "Why is wilderness important?" is like asking why anything in our background is important. Are calcium and phosphorus of which our bones are made important? Is fresh water important? Are trees and flowers and grasslands important?

Some will answer "yes" and call the questions silly. But many, lacking a lively sense of biological beginnings and ecological history, are unconvinced. Content to accept the increasingly mechanized world in and around cities as sufficient for human needs, they ask: Have we not risen above the animal world and its wilderness trappings, by renouncing Nature?

We should in turn ask these people: Can you understand yourselves apart from your ethnic roots, your cultural history, your family ancestors? So also as earthlings, look to your beginnings, to your natural history, for insight to your needs, your interests, your feelings, your sense of beauty and belonging.

Perhaps by saving wilderness we preserve an important part of ourselves. That was Thoreau's belief. In wildness, he said, is the salvation of the world. For him, as for Grey Owl, the spiritual dimension of wilderness experience was foremost--the antidote to humanity's preoccupation with itself.

Often, without realizing why, we recreate ancestral environments, surrounding ourselves with green carpeting and floral wall patterns, caged birds and pet animals, landscape pictures of trees and water, lawn savannas sprinkled with shade trees and shrubbery. We try to escape monotony by creating a tamed diversity, dimly recognizing that asphalt and glass buildings do not a living world create. Further, we recognize the deadening effects of artificially cheap and mean environments.

Such responses, such memories, are powerful arguments for interspersing within the monocultural wheat belt major tracts of diverse native grassland, and woodlands too, insofar as they have survived

in valleys. Unfortunately, most native prairie has been heedlessly destroyed by the cow and the plough. No thorough inventory was taken before the damage was done and we will never know the extent of the loss.

Two values have been proposed for the remaining wild natural ecosystems of the Earth. The first is the use-value of what is preserved. Both the World Conservation Strategy and the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Report) stress the utility of preservation. Save ten or twelve percent of continental forest and grassland ecosystems, they say, because we may need them in the coming population crunch. Save endangered species because of their potential for food and drugs. In its best light, the thought is ungenerous.

The second value, on a higher plane, is symbolic. The fundamental reason for preserving whatever wildness remains on land and in water is the symbolism of the act, the implicit recognition of values beyond humanity, something other than ourselves that ought not to be destroyed, an expression of wonder and awe before the marvellous world that created us and that, once gone, we cannot recreate.

Note the shift in emphasis, like changing the popular slogan, "Parks are for People" to the more subtle "People in the service of Parks." Wilderness, wild areas, can only survive as natural ecosystems that are ministered to, served not just preserved, for only such attitudes on our part set their values above human needs and wants. Otherwise, bereft of the only protection that counts--high valuation--they will be used to death.

How are we doing on the western plains? Where are we with our new appreciation of wild areas and wild creatures? Just about where everyone else is: picking around the edges of a few dominating land uses--agriculture, forestry and mining--that continue to treat disdainfully what is left of the native landscape.

In Canada, agriculture rules the south, and ideas of balanced land use--the essence of conservation--have been thrown out the window. Apart from a few sections of native grassland preserved due to efforts initiated under the International Biological Program of the 1970s and a scattering of smaller reserves, the native ecosystems that once occupied the fertile lacustrine and ground moraine plains of the prairie provinces are gone.

Public un-ease is countered by old arguments that all the land is needed for farm-family survival, for food, for greater production. People must always be first, the world environment a distant second. If twinges of guilt are felt we salve them with efforts to obtain more parks as recreation areas, with weak Ecological Reserve Acts, with forlorn attempts to save a few rare and threatened species of animals and plants. The primary focus is on habitat conservation, not in the interests of the wildlife but to ensure that sportsmen are not without moving targets.

We propose to stem the development tide by a multitude of uncoordinated finger-in-the-dike programs with utilitarian purposes up-front. In Western Canada we have under various degrees of protection, subject to the vagaries of ministerial discretion, a range of permitted uses: provincial parks, park reserves, wilderness areas, wildlife management units, fish and wildlife development fund lands, regional parks, provincial wildlife refuges and sanctuaries, game preserves, heritage marshes, protected areas, community pastures, PFRA community pastures, critical wildlife habitat, public hunting grounds, fur-bearing animal refuges, game bird refuges, goose refuges, ecological reserves, natural areas, buck for wildlife projects, prohibited access wildlife areas, special conservation areas, national parks, national historic parks, migratory bird sanctuaries, national wildlife areas, Ducks Unlimited projects and military reserves.

Let no one say that we are not hard at work in hundreds of little ways, throwing up flimsy barricades against encroaching development, trying in makeshift ways to ensure that some Wild survives in the West!

The fortress approach to preserving wilderness will not work. More than 70 threats to wilderness parks have been identified, most originating outside park boundaries: acid rain, mining, air and water pollution from pulp mills, urban encroachment, roads, sour-gas wells, deforestation, overgrazed rangelands, till agriculture, to name a few.

Protective fences are not the answer. The only firm foundation for wilderness preservation is psychological and attitudinal, beginning with the recognition that the ancestral world is important, far beyond the importance of its most precocious species.

If current attitudes and trends continue, revisit the Grain Belt in 20 years and experience terminal monotony - no more native prairies, no undrained wetlands, no aspen bluffs, no lakes worth the name, no interesting kame, esker and glacial beach landforms (they are going fast for sand and gravel). Just a few salt-tolerant and drought-resistant cereal and oil-seed crops covering the depleted soils for miles and miles, with rangelands ploughed and seeded to brome and crested wheat grass for miles and miles.

That prospect ought to spur quick action. The stakes are high in terms of landscape attractiveness, good water and food, possibly even survival. Eco-centric education, switching the emphasis away from ourselves, is the key. Parents, teachers, everyone, along with responsible institutions--departments of environment, of natural resources, of parks and natural areas both governmental and university--should turn their attention to it and make it their focus and special mission.

To be at home on the planet and welcome here, humanity must understand and appreciate the primacy of that home, the Eden we have never left, and the wild that is its emblem.

[Other Ecocentric Texts](#)