

Why Practice Natural History?

Rewilding Natural History

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Many people who currently advocate for nature, and for the importance of nature in human lives, focus on what can be termed domestic, nearby, everyday nature. Nature might be a favorite tree in one's neighborhood, or a local park, or one's garden, or one's pet, or what Tallmadge (2004) refers to as the "buzzing, flapping, scurrying, chewing, photosynthesizing life forms" all around us in the urban landscape.

Domestic nature is important. It's what most of us have close at hand. People can relate to it. People can garner immediate benefits by accessing it. But truth be told, domestic nature is only half the story. It's only half of what we need. The other half is wild nature. For as a species, we came of age in a natural world far wilder than today, and much of the need for wildness still exists within us, body and mind.

It's of course a contentious question: What is wildness? That society must now ask this question shows why the practice of natural history is now more important than ever and forms the core of the central reason we should engage with wild nature (Kahn, et al., in preparation). We believe that wildness in the natural world often involves that which is big, untamed, unmanaged, not encompassed, self-organizing, and unencumbered and unmediated by technological artifice. We can love the wild. We can fear it. We are strengthened and nurtured by it.

Part of what the wild offers are clear choices, with the sanity that emerges through outcomes that can involve warmth and cold, a full belly, the strength to move and the freedom and land to do so, and living and dying. Is it safe to cross the river or not? Should I set up camp now or can I extend the day's climb a little further? I see the grizzly and the grizzly sees me, which, as Turner

(1996) says, is a wild experience "in a most intimate, carnal way, an experience that is marked by gross alterations in attention, perception, body language, body chemistry, and emotion. Which is to say you feel yourself as part of the biological order known as the food chain, perhaps even as part of a meal" (p. 85). Turner (2000) also says: "To walk a trail after bushwhacking is to cross mental borders: the border between lost and found, not knowing and knowing, nonhuman and human, wild and tame, hard and easy, dangerous and safe, deciding and merely following... To walk a trail after bushwhacking is to dumb down" (p. 65). The wild can also make us brave. Thomas (2006) recounts an experience in the 1950's, when she was living with the Ju/wasi tribe in the Kalahari Desert. A Ju/wa woman was caught in a metal animal trap that had been set by a Western biologist. It was far from the tribe's camp. People from the tribe missed her, tracked her, and finally saw her from a distance. What they saw was that the woman was standing tall and strong and proud. When they finally got to her she collapsed from exhaustion. They extracted her leg from the trap. She had lost a lot of blood. But she had known that had she shown weakness, alone and trapped and bleeding on the savannah, she would have been easy prey that day, and not have been living that night.

More than sixty years ago, Aldo Leopold (1949) wrote, "We all strive for safety, prosperity, comfort, long life, and dullness. The deer strives with his supple legs, the cowman with trap and poison, the statesman with pen...but too much safety seems to yield only danger in the long run. Perhaps this is behind Thoreau's dictum: In wildness is the salvation of the world. Perhaps this is the hidden meaning in the howl of the wolf, long known among mountains, but seldom perceived among men" (p. 133).

Most natural historians have gotten too soft. This is a difficult thing for us to say because the natural historians we know are marvelous people, and the older ones we know have had deep and wild younger years in wild country. A few still do. But times are changing. There are fewer wild lands. There is less wild nature. And younger natural historians coming of age have not had comparable wild experiences. It's partly a problem of the shifting baseline, what Pyle (2002) refers to as the extinction of experience. The problem has also been characterized in terms of environmental generational amnesia (Kahn, 2011): that members of each generation construct their conception of what is environmentally normal based on the natural world they encounter in childhood. The crux is that, with each ensuing generation, the amount of environmental degradation and the loss of wildness increase, but each generation conceives of that new condition as non-degraded and normal.

A final word about how we understand the idea of wildness. Wildness exists not just "out there" – in relation to the external natural world – but within. We *are* human nature. The primal, the wild, also exists within us and in our relation to one another. That wildness often emerges from primal energy, especially that of sexuality and aggression, which in most cultures world-wide today often lead to unhealthy expression: to sexual domination of men over women, for instance; or of military domination of one people over another. But it need not. Done right, by grounding it in reciprocity, primal wild energy allows us to experience deeply and to feel deeply alive. Done right, primal wild energy is a beautiful part of the human psyche. It exalts humanity.

One of the challenges and opportunities for Natural History is to describe, name, and bring forward wild nature – especially our experience of it – so that we can engage what's left and where possible recover what's lost.

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