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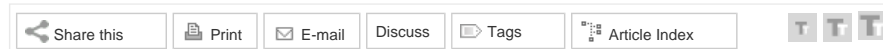
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Calm is all nature

Bill Sherwonit



It's the most natural thing in the world, to want to connect with wild nature. For as much as we ignore or deny the fact, we humans are of nature. It's our original home, the ultimate source of our being, the "environment" in which our ancestors evolved over millions of years.

Like many who've studied our species' origins, I've come to believe that we carry primal memories of our wild roots, whether it's in our genes or what might be called the human spirit. Human ecologist

Paul Shepard argued forcibly (and, I think, convincingly) that we modern, high-tech folks are "genetically wild." Despite any highfalutin notions we have about our evolved condition, genetically we remain Pleistocene hominids adapted to life in the wilderness.



Eric Rolph

A rainbow in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park in summer 2007.

"The savage mind is ours!" Shepard argues. "We may be deformed by our circumstances, like obese raccoons or crowded, demented rats, but as a species we have in us the call of the wild."

Look in the mirror and what do you see? Wild thing. It's an idea I can live with, joyfully.

For all of the ways that the "natural world" has been degraded, our planet remains a miraculous place, marvelously rich with wild life, from algae and lichens and redwoods to spiders and frogs, chickadees and grizzlies and, yes, people. No matter where we've chosen to settle - Mexico City, Paris, Calcutta, Anchorage, or Barrow - wild nature is manifested all around us, if we'll only take the time to notice.

Even our nation's greatest metropolis, New York City, has pockets of wildness, Central Park chief among them. An amazing assortment of critters has penetrated this most intimidating of American urban-culture strongholds: coyotes, deer,

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herons, even peregrine falcons. But whether or not you share your neighborhood with falcons or foxes, there is always the sky and the weather. And the insects that bug us so.

When we're new to the world, we sense the wonder and mystery all around us, including others of our own kind. We've all seen the wide-eyed wonder and in-the-moment glee that shines brightly in the eyes of an infant. But as we grow older, we seem to lose that understanding, and, as scientist Loren Eiseley once wrote, "tend to take it [the world] for granted." This is especially true in modern high-tech cultures like ours, where "We rush to and fro like Mad Hatters upon our peculiar errands, all the time imagining our surroundings and ourselves quite ordinary creatures."

In our society, and increasingly around the world, there's a large and growing disconnect between humans and wild nature as our attention turns toward the technological wonders and distractions of our time: TV and cell phones, movies and videos, computer games and the Internet, snowmobiles and jet skis, cars and trucks and SUVs.

We go from home to car to office or shopping center or health club or movie theater, barely noticing the wider, wilder, more-than-human world around us, unless the weather has inconvenienced our busy schedule or a moose steps into traffic.

It's not just in the cities. Residents of Anaktuvuk Pass, a small Nunamiut Eskimo village nestled deep in Alaska's Arctic wilderness, have satellite dishes, televisions, and Internet-linked computers. People get around on ATVs and snowmobiles and jets. Native elders there and in other villages mourn that youngsters are forgetting "the old ways" while drawn into the new, that tribes are losing centuries-old traditions that bonded their people with the larger community of life.

Kids spend less and less time outdoors. And when they do go outside, it's often to participate in organized sports where the attention is given to the competition, not the surroundings. For children, as for adults, life seems faster paced and more structured than what I recall of my own childhood.

In one vivid memory from my early teens, I am playing baseball with several buddies. Only four of us have come to the field on this splendid summer afternoon, not nearly enough for a game, so we're playing "hit it out": we take turns hitting the ball and fielding. At one point I take a break while the others continue on. Flopping to the ground, I lie on soft green grass and gaze into the sky, which is an incredibly rich, soothing blue. A slight breeze tickles my face and bright sunlight warms my skin. Held by both earth and sky, with my friends' laughter and chatter echoing in the distance, I am as relaxed as I can ever remember.

How often does that kind of play happen today? Not often enough, I'd wager.

Kept indoors by circumstance or choice, youngsters learn less and less about the nature of their homelands, even in Alaska, with its wilderness and wildlife riches. Friends employed in the Anchorage School District have told me that shockingly few students have been to the hills and coastal areas along the city's fringes, or even the parks inside it.

Given the abundant evidence that early experiences deeply influence our later beliefs, passions, and behavior, people's relationship with the greater world -- and consequently their empathy with it -- has to suffer from this insulation. I expect

that our ability to recognize the miracle of life, and its grand diversity, would suffer as well, along with our ability to love the world.

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