

Living Wild: Wilderness and our place in it

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The popular conception of what constitutes a wilderness is pretty vague, but has been summed up quite well by the terminally boring U.S. wilderness act of 1964. Among other things a wilderness must have “at least 5,000 acres of land” or be big enough to be preserved in its natural condition. No permanent “improvements” (?) are allowed and it must not be inhabited by permanent human settlements. It also babbles on about recreation and features of scientific, educational, scenic or historical value.

This is bollocks. Many millions of people around the world live in and with the wilderness, although sadly their numbers are dwindling as every day of “progress” eats it's way into the earth's billions of years of heritage. Nowhere does the act mention the right of wilderness to be left, unmolested, to do its own thing. Just as many scientists cannot accept anything that cannot be tested within the narrow confines of their discipline, so the economists refuse to allow the existence of anything which cannot be quantified, managed, marketed and consumed. If it can't pay its way, then it must go. I would like, in this article, to look for a more human definition of wilderness; and on the way, to look at what our place in it might be.

Wilderness must contain wildness, so this is a thing to look for in our search. Take a walk through the noisy, poisoned streets of any town or city. Looking around, it would be easy to believe that here, for sure, wildness is absent. But look again — in every pavement crack, every wall, gutter and corner, the green shoots of life are pushing through. Our cities have not displaced wilderness, they have been built on top of it! The fact that it is still there and still fighting is a testament to its tenacity and strength.

Even in the square mile in London — the central nervous system of the all-consuming beast that is trying to turn our world into an uninhabitable wasteland — even here, the mosses squeeze their way through the stone straitjacket and unfold themselves; in the heart of the temple of Mammon they boldly worship the sun.

Wherever you are, wilderness is only a few feet away. Under the pavements and roads, under every building, is the subsoil which will one day give birth to the forest which will tear open the tarmac and rend the concrete palaces to dust.

Anyway, enough of the esoteric crap. What about food, shelter, clothing, education. What about parties, meeting people, having fun? Well, wild people all over the world have all these things in abundance (or they did until we came along). Another popular misconception is that living wild means running around grunting and hitting each other over the head with sticks.

This is what happens in “civilised” societies on Saturday nights. Wild bears do not have the same culture as wild salmon, or ants. In the same way living wild is different for humans too. For humans ‘wild’ means ‘tribal’. Wild is how we have lived for almost all the time we have existed, and many people still are wild. It is not an untested thesis.

Tribes also tend to fight each other. This is a shame, but it is a part of our natural condition, and the removal of this trait must not be a stumbling block on the way to a better world. Our supertribes also fight each other, to vastly more devastating effect, and to the point where now our very existence is threatened, so this objection to tribalism is not valid.

Another objection is that it’s all very well advocating a better way of living, such as permaculture, but we couldn’t all live like that because there are too many of us and not enough land. Sure, on the face of it, an acre of supermarket holds a lot more food than an acre of smallholding, but if you look into the total land use our way of living entails, you’ll find that an average westerner accounts for about 18 acres of land. Even the assumption that modern agriculture is more productive turns out to be a myth. In China over 2,000 years ago, they were producing more food per acre than even the most “efficient” farmers are now. They did this without the massive loss of topsoil we are having, so they weren’t stealing from their children either, as we are.

Food grows everywhere, that’s not really the problem. The problem is the convoluted system we have for picking and eating it. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote:

“The first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, bethought himself of saying ‘this is mine’ and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civic society. From how many crimes, wars and murders ... might not any one have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, and crying to his fellows: ‘beware of listening to this impostor!’? You are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody.”

As things stand, I could not get up and walk out of the city and survive. This is because all the land “belongs” to someone. Some brave people do try to live like this. They are called travellers and sent to prison. The reason they are travellers is that they aren’t allowed to stay anywhere. Wherever they go the locals, in their smug suburban self-satisfaction, won’t tolerate them and have the nerve to call them dirty, while their own sewage kills the rivers and their rubbish festers in giant landfills or burns in incinerators, poisoning the ground water and the air... But their gardens are nice and tidy aren’t they?

All the food we eat comes originally from wild species. I stayed on a farm for a while once, which kept cattle. One day I saw the farmer running across a field banging two pans above his head. When I asked why, he said he was chasing some deer away. As I persevered with my questioning he said that the wild deer ate a lot of grass which was for his cattle. I asked why he didn’t just forget about the cattle and eat deer meat instead, as this would obviously make for an easier life. He mumbled something about city folks and stormed off. Of course I’m not really that stupid – I know about mortgages and such like. Mortgage actually means ‘death grip’ in French. Perhaps if more farmers could speak French they wouldn’t have got in the mechanised mess they are in now.

The point is that there really is abundant food around, if there wasn’t, we’d all be starving. With a different (all right, very different) system we could all live healthy and fulfilling lives.

The things that civilisation claims as it’s benefits are all really the benefits of human society, mutated to meet the needs of industry rather than the human spirit. The flashing lights and

pounding rhythms of the night clubs are a pale, soulless imitation of the tribal gathering. Television replaces the fire and storytelling. We no longer interact with each other, we merely stare in unison at the box while its torrent of mind-numbing mediocrity pours uncriticised into our subconscious mind; there to leave its loveless, isolating value system. Our transport systems enable us to use the energy of other life to travel greater and greater distances at ever faster speeds, but moves us ever further from each other. Everything becomes a commodity, even loyalty now has a card in our supermarkets.

In order to accept this replacement for the real, living world, we must be sheltered from exposure to reality; otherwise we have something to compare our lives to. For urban people now, wilderness is experienced through the theme park or an interpretation center. Second hand visions of a world we are not part of. We have little opportunity to learn from the few tribal people who are left. They live a long way away and are having enormous problems as a result of the advance of industrial civilisation. The books and films we see are mostly interpretations by people who didn't understand what they saw, but they are all we have. These are the people we need to learn *from* not *about*. If we can't do this we can learn from nature itself; not by going on conservation weekends making 'management plans' but from non-intrusive observation. Our 'experts' cannot teach us anything about this, we ourselves must do it. We must resist industrial civilisation both physically in direct action and mentally in resisting the ideas of the global management merchants.

As an example of this, I'll tell you a story about my allotment. I didn't have a clue what to do with it, so I just sort of left it for a few months. I farted around a bit, but didn't really do much. I got some manure and dumped it in a patch, intending to do something with it later, and in the late autumn a friend gave me some broad beans. I planted them (ie stuck them in the ground) at the top end of the plot and planted a few other things, then winter came. One day I opened a cupboard in the kitchen and found some potatoes that had sprouted. Rather than throw them away, I took them up to the allotment.

I sat on the ground for a while, wondering what the hell to do with the spuds, then saw an old guy a few plots away. Ah! thought I, he'll know! So off I went. He gave me a very long winded description of what I now know to be double digging, along with spacing instructions and other bits of information. I went back and got myself ready to start, but my laziness took over. Balls to this, I thought; things grow in soil. So I just got the spuds and stuck them in the pile of manure, which had mysteriously shrunk into a plateau about 1 foot thick and 10 feet square with spade marks in it. Then I forgot about the allotment for a while as the Twyford Down campaign was hotting up.

When I returned a few months later it was a glorious late spring day. I looked around and saw that mine was by far the most beautiful allotment on the site. A weed order would soon be winging its way to me. I found the potatoes easily enough, though they now had many friends, and proceeded to scabble around to find the roots. Amazingly within two seconds a couple of new potatoes fell into my hand. the soil was loose so it was easy. I was virtually just picking them up. No harder than a supermarket shelf. Since I hadn't dug to put them in I didn't need to dig to get them out. And there were masses of them.

Thus encouraged, I set out to find the broad beans. I struggled through the undergrowth to the top of the plot. No sign. Brambles, ground elder and lots of other things I don't know the names of, but no beans. I found some cabbages and some weird things I later found out were artichokes. I stopped and thought for a while, and figured out where I had planted them. Sure

enough, under a tangled mass of something or other, were the broad beans. Loads of them, not a one in any way damaged or blemished. All I can think of is that the birds didn't know they were there. I realise that two items isn't much from a whole allotment, but I had left the rest of it alone. I did no work at all. I think that by not imposing a regimented regime on it, I had the healthiest allotment around, and I would have since built on this principle but the council took the allotment off me.

The point of this example though, is to show that conventional wisdom is not necessarily the only wisdom, and a lot of what we are told comes not from common sense but from the old Victorian protestant work ethic. A work ethic is essential to industrial civilisation. Without it people see work as it really is: toil, suffering and misery. The techniques of industrial farming are accepted as the only way forward, we forget that plants grow without our help. We believe it when we are told that the industrial system produces more food than the older methods, without looking at the whole picture of how much work is involved and how much outside input is needed to do this. According to Gerald Leach ('Energy and Food Production' — IPC Science and Technology Press, Guildford, 1976) primitive farmers, fertilising with manure and cultivating by hand, produce 5 to 50 calories worth of food for every calorie they expend, while the industrialised systems of the west put in 5 to 10 calories, primarily fossil fuel, to obtain one food calorie in return.

That the devil finds work for idle hands is quite literally true, and we must resist this devil. If our hands are idle we have time to think, and then we can see what a huge deception we are under. We work and work to produce surpluses, and to produce things we don't need, then we believe that we need the system that makes us work so hard. Wild nature can show us how to avoid these traps we have made, if we can only give up our blind faith in industrial civilisation. Ultimately, the ideal life would be that beyond even sensible agriculture, where we live in a situation where all our food needs are met with a minimum of interference. This, though, requires a far lower population than we have now. It is a worthwhile long term aim though, and something to progress towards. Those who do still live like this must be given back the land they lived in, and this will be possible when we in the first world stop parasitising the rest of the planet. It is not modern agriculture that supports us, rather it is our ability to plunder the rest of the planet.

We need to progressively alter our society so we interfere less and less, not more and more as we do now. This entails a total change in attitude. It is quite revealing that no european language has a word that is the opposite of 'do'. the nearest we can get is 'not do'. Many of the primitive societies our ancestors found had no word for work. The concept simply didn't exist. In our language the opposite of work is rest, but there is an implication here, rest is always to allow recuperation to enable work to continue. We don't have an opposite to work that is of equal value. Not doing is an alien concept; this must change.

We also need to change our attitude towards leaders. We don't need them — we should despise them rather than adulate them. We all possess the ability to work things out among ourselves. Strong and forceful characters are an essential part of any society, but must be questioned and controlled at all times. The 'leaders' of many other cultures are very different from ours — they are not in charge, they merely co-ordinate. We call them leaders because our language does not have an adequate word to translate to. There have been other examples like ours in the past, such as Ghengis Khan, and their example should be a lesson to us. Leaders emerge in our culture not as a result of their wisdom, but as the result of actions caused by a psychological illness (usually neurosis), which put them into a position of power with no real ability to sensibly wield that

power, and no control mechanism to relieve them of it (ie a submissive population). There are even training courses to enable people to acquire the symptoms of neurosis so they can become leaders. Thus our inhuman system perpetuates itself.

This is not a call to return to the “dark ages”, or to the kind of life we have come from. This is merely pointing out that we are still totally dependent on wild nature for our continued survival, that we have gone in the wrong direction in separating ourselves from it, and that any viable future depends on relearning that which we have lost.

There is a huge lobby in the world with vested interests in perpetuating the myth that we couldn't live in a more human and natural community. Their main argument is that there are too many of us. This is a lie. Don't be misled by the economists and grey suited bignessmen, or the conservationists who dance to their drum. Beware of listening to these impostors! The wilderness is not a place to visit on the way from McDonalds deathburgers to Dismaland, it is a place to live and thrive in, work and play in, love and make love in. It is the only place for humans, and the sooner we bring it back into our lives, the sooner we will be whole again.

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