

## NATURE'S BACK! NOW WHAT ?

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Recently, while sailing quietly on the Bay, Shirley counted twenty-two pelicans in a single flock gliding by. We remarked that we were so pleased as when we first arrived here, even a single pelican was a bit of a rarity. Hooray, nature's back! As we pattered on south past Wolf Trap Lighthouse, we came on the fish traps set up by watermen desperately trying to continue to feed his family by this thousand-year-old method. Each post and each span of the net was a pelican perch. Pelicans after a free lunch at the waterman's expense. Hooray, nature's back! But, the waterman says, now what?

Around 20,000 years ago, a new kind of creature began to leave its mark on the Americas—humans. They found woolly mammoths and other such creatures we only know from the fossil record. Humans persevered. The mammoth did not. Whether those two facts are related is inconclusive. The descendants of those early peoples drove great herds of buffalo over cliffs—presumably to feed their families. Their religions, for the most part, were naturalistic. Deities and spirits related to things of nature. Our UU (seventh) principle stating our desire to recognize and coexist with others who share our natural world rings a cord with our favorite perspective of the Native Americans, if not in fact, at least in our imaginations. Can you see our tribe of naked UU's, screaming and hollering, as we drive a herd of buffalo over a cliff? We would have at least had the foresight to have a fleet of refrigerator trucks standing by to reduce the awful waste that must have resulted. And, I would hate to think how long it would take for a UU tribal unit with its normal mixture of vegetarians to consume the proverbial mammoth—one bite at a time.

Between 400 and 500 years ago, a new kind of peoples began to leave their mark on the Americas—Europeans. All up and down the East Coast they found buffalo, beaver, wolves, and, in the north, wolverines. A fact we only know from the historic written record. This new type of human persevered. The Eastern buffalo, wolves, and wolverines did not. Other native mammals, birds, and native peoples survived—marginally. The new arrivals, as did their predecessors, celebrated the harvest, calling it their Thanksgiving. Their god was less a god of nature but more a god of privilege. A god with a chosen people. And harvest was indeed the operative word.

Private, then commercial, hunters and trappers harvested mammals and birds for food, for clothes (including much finery), and for protection to preserve the person, the children, the livestock, and the crops. The woodlands were harvested for shelter, warmth, and constructs to raise the standard of living and, more extensively, to enable the expansion of agriculture.

So there we were at the beginning of the last century in an environment—tames—threatened. This realization prompted a conservation movement focused on sustainability of resources, protection of those remaining, and recovery of those lost. One of the founders of the modern conservation ethic, Theodore Roosevelt, became president in

1901. To stop this so-called market-hunting, Roosevelt and others sold the idea that wildlife should be protected from commerce and nurtured for all citizens to enjoy as a renewable national resource. The agencies made a few mistakes. They paid bounties for predators, including mountain lions, wolves, bear, coyotes, fox, bobcats, hawks and owls. This greatly reduced or eliminated their role in game management, but the object was to rebuild the populations then to manage the harvest. A whole society developed a futuristic view forward—conservation and sustainability.

And what of the usurpation of habitat land? Technology, replacing the “nature knows best” farming techniques, has given us a great leap forward in the quality, safety, and quantity of food we produce and greatly reduced the amount of farm land necessary to produce it. The Irish potato famine and its ilk are a thing of the past. The potato makes a good object lesson in the progress of agricultural technology. In 1920, given good soil and animal fertilizer, 75 100-pound sacks per acre was an exceptional yield. By 1940, the best methods produced 82 sacks per acre. Then came modern agriculture with its chemicals and pesticides and results were: 1950, 165 sacks; 1960, 208; 1970, 247; and 1980, 275. In 1901, one third of the people were farmers feeding the rest of the citizens. Today, less than 3 in 100 feed triple the population. And less land is needed to feed the people such that 70% of the eastern land that was forested in 1600 is forested again, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

Another factor in this reforestation is the use of wood preservatives in pressure treated lumber for fences, porches, decks and homes. We have thus saved a forest of trees two times the size of New England (1990 numbers). Thirty-two percent of our nation’s land is now forests and woodlots. During one 30-year period in the middle of the last century, tree areas increased twenty percent, while better forest technology increased average wood growth rates to 3 ½ times that in 1920.

The good news is that the product of the emphasis on conservation technology is that nature is back, most evident by contrast, in the East. And with the return of the forests, the wildlife has rebounded. Yes, in ever growing numbers. To help achieve this rebound, we have created a culture venerating each member of each of these now successful rebounders. Now what?

Now what with beavers chomping Richard’s roses and ornamental trees or snapping turtles munching my carefully planted water lilies and shortening pond fish. And the deer! And the raccoons! Who, in our case, have designated our stair down to the water as their outhouse with a view. No wolves as yet, but a new issue is the question of how to handle a potential encounter in my woods with a 2500 pound buffalo escaped from my neighbor’s field across the road. By the way, did you know one of those guys can run twenty miles non-stop once they’re out of the fence? I’ve had them paw the ground and charge at me—just being ornery. And they won’t be herded, forced, or enticed to your bidding as is usual with domestic cattle. No wonder the colonials gave up trying to domesticate them. And their six-foot weld wire fence is a psychological ploy—it will contain them only so long as they don’t find out that it can’t. C’mon over and I’ll show you the first buffalo returning to Lancaster County in ages. But I drift.

“Most Easterners don’t realize it, but they live in a huge forest.” Not my words, but those of Gordon Batcheller, a New York State wildlife biologist, commenting on a flight from Albany to Boston that it is almost all woods now from one town to the other. “But when you get down into it, you see that woods is full of people.”

Says David Forster, a biologist at Harvard, “it’s hard to imagine a situation where more people and more animals live in close contact.” A WSJ article talks about an ex-trapper in Oxford, Massachusetts, who changed his title to “wildlife damage control professional”. The difference is a trapper gets \$20 per beaver pelt where he now gets \$150 to remove a “problem beaver” or \$750 to take out a typical family of five—plus, presumably, retaining his \$20 per pelt. And the beaver population has tripled since 1996 as drowning traps, which took 2000 beaver annually, were outlawed through efforts by animal rights activists. Even the Audubon Society magazine attacked the law change requiring live traps lamenting “an animal terrified for hours before being bonked on the head”. The take dropped from 2000 to 100. The more rural folks fell back to their alternative to trapping—“high speed lead poisoning”. Beaver, replanted in the Adirondacks in 1800 are once again everywhere. There are now more beavers than when Paul Revere made his famous ride. The sound of running water triggers in beaver “compulsive damming disorder”.

When they flood driveways, inundate septic systems, contaminate wells, or gnaw down prized roses and tree, the ex-trapper’s phone rings. Hundreds of companies have sprung up in this new business of dealing with beaver, raccoon, skunks, dumpster diving bears, garden-chomping deer, and the occasional itinerant moose. The biggest company is Critter Control, Inc., of Traverse City, Michigan with ninety franchises. Some residents with experience limited to the Discovery Channel are terrified when a wild animal shows up.

Doug MacCleery, Senior Policy analyst for the U.S. Forest Service, states reforestation alone can’t account for the wildlife population explosion. He continues that historically, wildlife was managed by Native Americans. Contrary to the myths of early forests as ancient, impenetrable, and static, they were shaped relentlessly by both nature and humans. Hundreds of thousands of acres were cleared for fields. Tens of millions more were burned frequently to improve game habitat, facilitate travel, reduce insect pests, remove cover for potential enemies, enhance conditions for berries, and to drive game. The close proximity of people and animals, lawns and deer, garbage and raccoons, dumpsters and bear are big contributors. And there are related consequences. The exploding population of deer have driven a number of bird species on to the Audubon watch list. By defoliating underforest, deer remove bird habitat. Should we UU’s be the deer’s protector? As the Hindu, the cow? As the Egyptian, the cat? Who gets the raccoon?

Lack of predators is a major factor in the wildlife explosion. However, there is a relatively new predator on the block as reported in the WSJ last month. That article began:

For nine weeks this spring in Ellington, Connecticut, twenty-five students in Steve Rogers' fifth-grade class counted every dead animal they passed on buses to and from school in this leafy exurb of Hartford. They tallied 190 creatures, including 10 skunks, 35 gray squirrels, 22 birds, eight rabbits, and 56 corpses they labeled URP's, for "unidentified road pizzas". The kids learn data collection and e-mailing as they contribute to a nationwide data set. And they get a close-up look at a grisly face of modern wildlife management—critter control by family car.

Cars have been running over animals since the model T days. What's new, say wildlife biologists, is the scope of today's carnage. In Henry Ford's day, for example, only about half a million white tailed deer existed across the entire United States. This year drivers will kill nearly four times that number. The word in the East is that the only deer predator left is a Chevy pickup. While not quite true, the Chevy pickup is moving up on the list. The Fund for Animals, a special interest group collecting money from those seeking to end all hunting, says hunters and trappers take dropped 25% in 1996 from the 200 million animals killed in the 1991 season.

The densely-populated eastern third of the country pushes ever deeper into old farmland that is now covered in forest grown back naturally. With such abundance from bird feeders and garbage plus manicured lawns providing an abundant feast to what's become known as these subsidized species.

Hitting big mammals does get attention, because they kill back. Deer-vehicle collisions in 1995 injured about 30,000 drivers and passengers and killed over 200. Deer kill more people in the U.S. than do all commercial airlines, train, and bus accidents combined in a typical year. In Ohio, for example, reported deer collisions are five times the level of twenty years ago, now exceeding 30,000. Wisconsin is first with 90,000 DVC's estimated last year.

The founders of the modern wildlife conservation ethic, when thirty miles per hour was fast, couldn't have imagined this. The first paved town to town road, outside Detroit, wouldn't even be built until 1908. But even though deer hunters killed over seven million deer last year and drivers killed another two million, the white tail population grew to an estimated 33 million last year. That means today's population equals the estimated number of deer in the country before Europeans arrived in 1620. And many of today's people occupy virtually the same piece of ground as this exploding wildlife population. Now some want that changed.

From the Washington Times' perspective, democracy appears to contribute to the problem as people are allowed to live pretty much wherever and how they wish. Democracy, it seems, gives too much power to the people. The EPA's so-called "Smart Growth" agenda includes stopping the outward growth of suburbia, forcing higher density, fewer single family homes, and curtailing road construction to force mass transit. Quoting Washington's most famous newspaper in some circles, December 6, 1999: "Not surprisingly, the average American doesn't subscribe to this agenda and resists it at the

local level. To overcome that, the EPA unleashed a campaign to convince the public that “Smart Growth” has majority support. Such that if the local government is not cooperative, federal officials could hit them with a big financial stick....According to the WSJ, the EPA’s move came after it was sued by the Environmental Defense Fund and other environmental groups for failing to enforce the section of the Clean Air Act that requires plans for controlling transportation growth. However, the EPA gave \$650,000 to the special interest lobbying group, the Environmental Defense Fund, to further so-called “Smart Growth” programs, thus funding a lawsuit against itself—creating the misleading impression that the EPA is responding to grass roots demand.”

This federal funding of lobbying groups was prohibited by the “Integrity in Government Act” which died during the early years of the previous administration. Its death frees government agencies with an agenda to provide taxpayers money to favored groups for the purpose of lobbying itself.

Relocating us is one option—federal government action to take away the people’s right to live how and where they want plus refusal to allow the taxpayers to spend their tax dollars on infrastructure to make such a lifestyle possible. Life in the woods of the suburbs and of the sub-suburbs becomes untenable as the roads and support structure decay. The rural woods empties of people leaving it to the wildlife—sure, that’ll work!

Wildlife agents and conservationists (not to be confused with environmentalists) complain they are hamstrung, in part, due to anti-hunting, anti-trapping edicts. Youngsters used to deliver newspapers and run trap lines for a little extra money. Over the intervening years, the range of conservation perspectives accommodated intensive, sustainable agriculture freeing more land for wildlife. But extremists under the “environmentalist” umbrella opposed to all interaction between humans and the non-human portion of nature have soured much of the public on sustainable wildlife harvests. The Animal Liberation Front, the militant arm of the animal rights movement, has joined the ecology terrorist group called Earth First! to commit sabotage even against the harvest of domestic animals by attacking poultry farms, cattle and sheep ranches, and animal feed lots in the West. They are also responsible for a number of arson fires in livestock auction barns and headquarters and took credit for the \$2.5 million destruction of the University of California Davis animal research center.

UU’s are sometimes an easy mark. For those of you who have never held a baby raccoon in your hands, or laid on the ground with a clutch of weeks old gray squirrels scampering over your jacket, or dug a spotted fawn out of an open post hole with your bare hands in hopes of helping it survive, may not know how easy it is to fall prey to the emotional challenge. Shirley and I have done all of those. Those special interest groups are expert at using heart strings to open wallets. But Nature IS back—now what?

Nature’s back in another form, with the reforestation of the East, although we must consider the issue on a nationwide basis. And that natural force to be reckoned with is forest fires. In the year 2000, a particularly high fire year, \$1.6 billion was spent fighting wildfires, a figure that surpassed the total of the previous three years combined,

according to Science News. Despite these efforts, more than 850 homes were lost. And, as we abandon access roads, curtail brush removal and maintenance of fire breaks, we should expect this level of conflagration to increase. We had cut forest fire losses through good management from 30 million acres per year of 100 years ago to a recent 40-year average of four million acres annually. Activists have prevailed over the last decade for things to be more “natural” in those areas and now fire acreage is up dramatically with the resultant loss of property and life, both human non-human. The main danger to our forests today comes from federal lands where no management is allowed because “nature knows best”. In addition to fires, they now serve as a foci for the production and dissemination of forest pests.

Interestingly, the champions of not protecting our forests are frequently also the champions of reducing the release of the products of combustion into our atmosphere. One million-acre forest fire is the Goliath to years of controls on the David’s of man’s technologies. Of course, neither holds a candle (pardon the pun) to volcanic eruptions of which there are about 100 per year. Caulk Mount St. Helens up to a million metric tons of carbon dioxide and a quarter million metric tons of sulfur dioxide—a piker compared to Mexico’s El Cajon at fifty times the sulfur gases. Not to mention the chlorine and fluorocarbon volcanic output of just two of Alaska’s active spewers, Mount St. Augustine and Mount Erebus, with annual output of nearly 600 times man’s worldwide production of CFC to add to the 300 times world production that enters the atmosphere annually from seawater evaporation. We must resist the distraction of forest fire emissions as another “Fatal Conceit” about how mankind impacts our environment—bad science. As in so many aspects of emissions arguments, we just aren’t any big deal compared to Mother Nature.

Regarding pollution, many of you boaters have probably noticed the VMRC signs in various coves and creeks around the bay closing those areas to shellfish harvest, typically e-coli traces in the water. The regulators, spurred on by environmental groups, were sure the perpetrators were us sub-suburban sprawlers and more controls and budget on their part were mandatory. Taxpayer dollars were given to Virginia Tech experts to prove the culprits along the Eastern Shore—but the science came up – over-population of raccoons. Politically, the wrong answer. So, the scientists picked a single cove with small creek bordered by new homes and paid a local farmer to use the “high speed lead poisoning” approach to decimate the raccoon population. Within the year, the water was free of e-coli, verifying the raccoons were the source, not the people. The state environmentalists suppressed the report and the grant was cancelled. However, the Virginia Tech team presents the data verbally to anyone interested. Another data point on how some deal with the challenges.

The suppression of this good science over bad has taken almost ten years to leak out and rise to the level of common knowledge. An article in the Rappahannock Record last month noted wild animal excrement is now suspect in many creek contamination problems—giving rise to the question of what is the real problem—the animals or overly aggressive standards. It’s not the contaminate that kills, it’s the dose. Just as we can take

a beneficial or a fatal number of aspirins, we can drink a fatal amount of water as a German fellow recently proved.

So, we celebrate that Nature's back in so many ways. The forests have returned, the wildlife is thriving, in fact, over-thriving, and we are once again at peace with nature—oops, went a bit too far there. Those romantic visions with which we are presented die hard.

How do we deal with these issues? Let me pose three questions for your comment:

1. Do we manage the forestlands or preserve them as impenetrable reserves? Where do we UU's expend our passions on this issue?
2. Do we manage the wildlife with human as predator or do we reintroduce natural predators and deal with the consequences? A real wolf at the door issue. Neither Junior nor Fluffy can be allowed to play with the local mountain lion.
3. Do we ring the bell, vote the vote, and send the check in response to the no-touch environmentalists? Or support the managed harvest conservationist? Or fund the government-will-solve-everything politician? Or to whomever sends us the cutest picture of a baby seal or a frazzled infant sand hill crane?

Once again, the most vocal of these issues are at the extremes. How do we UU's look beyond the noise and keep our balance?