How to Hear a Whippoorwill

Mankind's natural future as an Adaptive Extremophile

By Ken Christenson. Dec. 8, 2016. www.extremophilechoice.com

Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest [creative] beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if [one succeeds] in loving the distance between them which makes it possible to see the other whole against the sky.
— Rainer Maria Rilke [adapted for Humans and Nature]

I would really like my grandchildren to hear a whippoorwill. Unfortunately they will have to spend at least a month of summer nights at our homestead on the Shebeshekong River because I myself have not heard that vesper call more than three or four times in the last two years. And I'm pretty sure it was the same lovelorn bird. Are the birds and wildlife in general keeping a low profile lately? Well, maybe you haven't noticed this, especially if your memory doesn't go back as far as mine. Human encroachment has been eroding true wilderness, and creating more small-woodland "edge", where the diversity of some very common, characteristically small and nonthreatening, human-adapted species seems to be fairly high. In the big picture however, species overall, in a world super-connected by tireless human transport, has been going extinct at an accelerated pace — especially the big apex predators and keystone species.

On the small subsistence farm where I grew up, just fifty years ago, the whippoorwill outside my bedroom window would startle me awake in the night! (They're really not all that musical when they call from twenty feet away.) And the frogs and the birds in springtime! I swear their cacophony was loud enough you couldn't hear your thoughts settle down at the end of the day! But now… well, now I can only hope that their raucous seasonal greeting isn't coming to the end of its own glorious time under the sun. Small farms on the very edges of what might still be called wilderness, where the whippoorwill thrives, are merging into great open fields where seagulls, crows, and jays occasionally compete with the "green revolution's" industrial chatter and buzz. I remember a more varied music, and more shades of green. But my memories alone won't sustain the grandchildren.

Then again, the reason my grandchildren can't stay with us long enough to hear a whippoorwill in the first place is they're all growing up in the city, and this means they are going to find many, many, other things to sustain them. We are a resilient species after all. (Is that what forgetfulness is for?) So what is there to sustain a grandfather's hope — or even to justify it? I first heard rumours of "environmentalism" in the 60s, and I spent my idealistic youth as a "back to the land" enthusiast in the drop-out 70s; and the wisdom then was, "nothing will change until people change". But as I began to grow and learn, as a student of ecology and of human nature, and as I pursued my career as a designer of high-end human habitations, I began to understand that human nature has a fairly consistent range, and that Natural habitat and human habitat have *always* had an uneasy relationship. We are only now coming to see that wilderness represents a whole other level of "creative intelligence", well beyond the simplicity of what we like to call, "humanized ecosystems". Wolf song, leopard frog croaks, and wHIP!-poor-wILL!s are orchestrated into a harmony that doesn't respond well to our instruments.

So here's the orchestral layout I would design if we are really serious about *living in harmony* with Nature: with our constantly morphing external instruments, let's play *countermelodies* to those gene-regulated rhythms that aren't quick enough to adapt themselves to us. And for god's sake let's not waste any more time *expecting* the majority of our fellow humans, who now live in cities, to play at our level — to become avid conservationists converted by Love of Nature. Yes we need their money, and their political will, but they're happy where they are; they don't hear the whippoorwills and this means their motivation, to at least do no harm, must come from a place that also affirms their chosen lifestyle. Also, let's not exhaust our nervous energy in the brass section, trying to scare each other into agreeing that we Need Nature; that we'll all die if we cut down the last tree. It might be true of course, but I might also point out that self-preservation did *not* deter the first Easter Islanders in that regard, and as it turned out, their descendants prospered anyway. In fact, until Europeans came (and showed them what they were missing) they were happily roasting their introduced chickens and rats, and eating produce from rock gardens cleverly designed to protect vegetables from the environmental stresses of a treeless island. So who are we to insist we know the future of such a resourceful species? Instead, let's celebrate what we naturally are: we are un-Naturally resourceful!

Let me explain. Though I'm a born technophile, my school "vacations" were spent as a logger; and I tramped the woods on many school weekends, helping my brother on his trap-line. These experiences taught me firsthand, and early, what a typically employed "wilderness man" looks like from a forest's point of view. Moreover, my subsequent work as a designer and builder of high-end homes and "cottages" has given me a detailed appreciation for just how un-Natural human nature can be. But it still took many years wrestling with my own conscience before it occurred to me that our short-sightedness is often self-inflicted, and in this case it might simply consist in refusing to question the prevailing environmentalist paradigm: that it's our disconnect-from-Nature that's short-sighted; and that reconnecting humans with Nature is the first necessary aim of the conservationist. I began to wonder if, rather than waving the "return to Nature" flag all the time, we should simply accept our un-Naturalness as *ordinary*. Could this take us "outside the box" when thinking about the environment problem? Maybe wild Nature isn't our natural environment after all, nor has it been for a very long time. Despite what many justly-concerned environmentalists might suppose, a science-based admission of our special status doesn't necessarily mean we are accepting our natural destructiveness as if we were some all-powerful "alien species". You see, the idea that we are *not a species at all*, in the ecological meaning, is actually the easiest scenario to *believe* if you live in the city. Do you see where I'm going with this? It's simple: the best way to unleash the inevitably destructive ambitions of an absentee landlord is to reinforce the notion that it's his "place" to be lord (with however benign intentions) of the land in the first place. Given our growing dependence on technology's "un-Natural" resources anyway, is it now time perhaps for us to question this "stewardship" approach?

This is where the science of evolutionary ecology has more to offer than the popular school of thought we know as "environmentalism". In unsentimental evo-ecological terms, the bodies of organisms (whether animals, plants, or fungi) are regulated by natural selection to perform for their short contingent lifetimes in such a way as to support a stable, multi-leveled, and maximally diverse ecology. What this ultimately means is that when human beings accessorize our bodies with technology we *necessarily* defeat Nature's co-evolving genetic regulation. And, what's more, we *can't* use our advanced brains to re-enter the system and "take our share"! To understand *sharing* in Nature, let's just consider the wolf: here is an apex predator that eats many times its weight in prey during its lifetime and, seemingly, gives nothing back but a little bit of buzzard and maggot food. But in fact, the trick that Natural regulation depends on, is that *every*

one of those temporarily living feasts, like the wolf itself, is engaged in an interactive life and death ballet that optimizes ecosystem diversity and stability. We can *never* do this. Everything about us exempts us from this response-ability. We take the fittest stag, not the unfit (how do you even measure "fitness", except in terms of a forest's evolving proprietary rules of inter-action?); we grow crops that suit us, but in the long run they can't survive on their own (evolution needs a *very* long run); and, increasingly, in our interactions with wild Nature our personal survival is not *at stake*. We are un-Natural, and we turn diverse ecosystems into "productive" (i.e. less diverse) farm-systems. Just by *accepting the long view of human-natural history* it becomes impossible to justify our "harvesting" of Natural systems with the argument that we "belong" there.

So how does this scenario actually *motivate* a largely urban human population to save wilderness? For this you'll have to bear with me a little longer, while we go even deeper into what might appear to be, at first glance, "bad news". In an article entitled "Human Error - Survival guilt in the Anthropocene" (Apr. 21, 2016, www.Laphamsquarterly.org/disaster/human-error) Jennifer Jacquet makes a provocative claim: "Survivor guilt may also exist at a species level. That humans have helped bring on other species' end times is not an easy feeling to deal with." The term "survival guilt" normally refers to a debilitating condition felt by holocaust survivors, but it ultimately suggests we humans are governed by what psychiatrist Arnold Modell describes as "an unconscious bookkeeping system" that haunts our mental lives when we are associated in any way — even indirectly —with past genocides, war-crimes, slavery, and white privilege. If this is the psychological case in general, we can certainly apply it to human caused species extinctions; but, moreover, it's reasonable to suppose that our sense of culpability must be especially urgent when the damage is still ongoing! And it must be stronger yet when our daily consumer habits directly contribute! So why would this claim be of interest to city folk? Even if "species survival guilt" operates at a subliminal level (I personally think it does), and especially if we're not convinced the "One with Nature" paradigm can save us, it might be palliative at least to hear it's not our fault: "The destruction was unavoidable because it's in our nature." But wait a minute, from a conservationist's point of view, this is the Big Worry, isn't it?

Surely accepting humanity's intrinsic destructiveness is a worst case scenario, because it might lead to a fatalism that will do harm on more levels than we even want to think about! But surely also, refusing to look at the things we fear is the very worst kind of box to get stuck inside of. In

her book, *The Places that Scare You* (Shambhala Publications 2001), the Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chodron shows us the magic in facing our fears; and I wonder if this is just where we need to go at this point in the save-the-whippoorwills-conversation. Maybe this fear of *our intrinsic destructiveness* is trying to tell us something? The Buddhist teachers are very clear about where fear comes from: from wanting stuff, from not wanting to lose what we have, from wanting it to be easy. For a hundred thousand years our species has struggled to extract what we see as "natural resources" which are, in ecological fact, evolved to efficiently serve a wild but regulated flourishing. But we, with our non-regulated technologies, have increasingly failed to contribute to this flourishing in a dependable, or even positive, way. Of course, in the beginning, it wasn't always easy for us either, but our lives *have* gotten easier, and steadily easier, and the flourishing has suffered in consequence. In fact, if we weren't so fearful about the consequences of distributing these resources fairly amongst ourselves (we're not all coherently, or even constructively, motivated) we'd now have it easier than any other species that ever existed. That's so un-Natural that the flourishing is long forgotten! Right now we can live anywhere we want on this planet (I'll let others develop the "Mankind in Space" theme); we're like those extremophile organisms that can live in super-heated deep oceanic black smoker vents, or under polar ice caps. So maybe now we *can* afford to give Nature back some of the more fertile parts of the planet that we stripped and plowed, or paved, and that we really don't *need* any longer. Having a clear and common understanding of our situation might even motivate us to share with each other, for here's the real advantage of facing an existential fear: *nothing motivates us more than knowing who we are*.

I won't pretend we don't have a lot of work to do, but fortunately it's the kind of work we're good at. (And there's another side to the argument that I won't get into here. In *Darwin Dogen, and the Extremophile Choice* I argue that Nature is a sovereign "intelligence", and this gives added weight to the "species survival guilt" scenario and to the need for respecting Nature — as both Friend and Teacher — rather than just managing 'it'.) Despite our sentimental notions of a harmonious human past in tribal villages, we've never really been good at interacting with Nature as a contributing player — like the wolf, or even the beaver. The diversity of the New World began to decline as soon as humans arrived, and we've only recently begun to understand how the continent we evolved on also suffered from our presence. With the yearly extinction rate now at 140,000 species above 'normal' we must conclude, on the face of it, that these species

cannot easily cohabit with humans, but like the whippoorwill, on the edge of our pioneering invasions, they are *a flourishing of wilderness*. We are no longer response-able to this flourishing, nor is it our place to oversee it. We are neither equipped nor interested because what we *are* good at, and getting better at, is harvesting energy directly from the sun, wind, and waves (and yes, responsible nuclear fission); we're good at building cities in deserts, carving them into Earth's bare bones, and even transplanting them underground; and we're good at growing food in farmed, climate-controlled spaces almost anywhere we can assemble metal, glass, concrete, and materials yet to be imagined. We've moved half of the human population from the country to the city in only a few hundred years, and we'll keep on moving, because it's in our nature. But let's be more deliberate about disentangling our habitats from Nature's from now on, OK? As if we're making the easiest choice of all; as if we're just *coming home* where we've always belonged, and we're leaving Nature to flourish where Nature belongs.

This can still be a wonderful living side by side. I would really like my grandchildren to hear a whippoorwill.