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The Spider Who Dreamed the World

A Meditation on Hierarchy,
Humility, and Biodiversity

by Donald Snow[©]

Twenty-five years ago, as a strapping undergraduate at Colorado State University, I ran across a Native American creation story which utterly arrested me. It's the Hopi story of Kokopeli, the hump-backed flute-player, and in those days it was starkly unfamiliar. I didn't know anyone who knew that story—not even my professors in southwest history and anthropology. These days, of course, with the arrival of the New West as decor in half the living rooms of North America, the Kokopeli image has become ubiquitous, but I suspect the story remains relatively unknown.

Kokopeli was the lowly locust who followed the people on their journey from the third world of water to the fourth world of earth.¹ When the people emerged from the *sipapu*, a hole or fissure in the ground, they were greeted by a guardian eagle who told them that before they could enter the earth world, one of them would have to pass a very rigorous test. Some poor soul would have to step forward and submit to being shot through the body with an arrow. Well, the people began to murmur among themselves, for no one wanted to die from the eagle's great bow. But then little Kokopeli stepped to the front, hobbling forward under the weight of his humped back. When Kokopeli volunteered, everyone laughed.

The eagle shot him, and the arrow passed through the body of the humble locust, but instead of dying, Kokopeli rose to his feet and pulled a flute from the hump on his back. He played music so sweet, it instantly healed his wound. The astounded eagle believed that a trick had been played; he demanded that Kokopeli stand again for the test. But the second trial went exactly as the first, and so the eagle saw that these people were the true people, and gave them instructions for a series of ritual migrations that would attune them to life on the earth. When the people embarked on their long migrations, they soon learned of other treasures contained in the hump of the lowly. As it turned out, he and he alone carried the seeds for the plants the people learned to grow. Without Kokopeli, there would have been no food, except what could be hunted, and no music; and so it is safe to say that he carried the seeds of settlement. The Hopi are among the most settled, rooted people on earth; amidst a society as migratory and unrooted as our American society, their sense of place is profound in ways we probably cannot imagine. They thank that locust, for he carried the seeds for both culture and agriculture on his back.

[©] Donald Snow is Executive Director of Northern Lights Institute and Associate Editor of Northern Lights Magazine. This essay first appeared as a talk presented June 10, 1996 at "Biodiversity Protection: Implementation and Reform of the Endangered Species Act," the seventeenth annual summer conference of the University of Colorado, Natural Resources Law Center

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¹ One version of the Kokopeli story can be found in Frank Waters, *BOOK OF THE HOPÍ* (Viking Press New York, 1963), at 446

This story I think about every year in June occurred on the final day of my 4th grade schoolyear. On that last day, they let us out around lunchtime, after a jittery, bursting-at-the-seams morning in class. I remember sitting in Miss Davis' upright care all that morning, staring out into the treetops from our third floor window in the antique Meadowvale School. Young primates have always received their tutelage up in the treetops, and had I not been in a rigid American elementary school, in the care of a teacher old enough, I believed, to have been the actual sister of Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, I might have been very comfortable up there, gazing out into the topmost branches of those generous oaks. This had not been my best year, but it was about to be one of my best summers, for, though I didn't know it at that moment, this would be the summer when my awareness of the rich *animal* life all around me was about to explode.

That final bell rang, and we burst out of Meadowvale like horses released from the gate at the Belmont Stakes. In characteristic fashion, I let all the others rush on by, and walked alone, tripping along Wood Street and then over to Goldie with a heart so light it was about to float out of my body. As I turned onto Messenger Street, the home-stretch, I remember sucking in the warm, humid air of a Pennsylvania summer morning, and feeling like this must have been the first day of creation. The leaves on the trees were still new—glossy and slick from their recent unfurling—and the sun burst from their surfaces like light from a thousand mirrors. I had three full months ahead of me—three months of aimless, ceaseless wandering out to the ends of city streets in our cramped little steel-mill town. Three months of weekend fishing trips with my dad. Three months with no homework. I walked up Messenger, free at last, and there, in the middle of the street, sat *my* messenger.

She was not sent from heaven. No, this one came out of the swamps. She was no city girl, but had spent her long life out among the cattails someplace nearby—out beyond the perimeters of our urban coil—but now here she lay, an improbable alien, stranger from a strange land, in the middle of a paved street so busy, so urgent with human life, it had sets of steel rails running down the middle, and black, dangerous wires overhead, and electric trolley cars that ran up and down in both direc-

tions every fifteen minutes. Here in the middle of it all, planted inexplicably between the trolley tracks as traffic whizzed by, lay an Eastern Painted Turtle. She had come to a stop, as if confused by all the hubbub. No one seemed to notice her.

She was more alone than I, far more alone, and I rushed out into the street to save her. Of course, in the version of this story I tell to my daughter, I dart into the path of an oncoming trolley, and I can see the fright in the passengers' faces as the car bears down on me. I stumble a bit as I scoop her up like a fumbled football, and then dive to safety, somersaulting heroically between two Buicks, before I land, panting, on the hot sidewalk. I hoist my prize into the air to see if she's alright, and she pokes her head out and seems to smile at me.

But in truth, in the less dramatic adult version of the story, there was little traffic, and the trolley car was not even in sight, and I trotted out into the quiet avenue, lowered her gently into MY shirt (for my arms were full of school stuff), then continued home in agony as she did her best to claw her way out of my clothing. By the time I got to my house, she had circumnavigated my torso several times, leaving a pink highway of clawmarks just above belt-level. I looked like a sapling someone had tried to girdle using toothpicks.

Well, we kept her for about a month, feeding her lettuce and red worms which the pet store owner told us to cut into tiny bite-sized pieces with cuticle scissors. Then one Saturday morning, at my father's urging, we took our moribund turtle to the Juniata River where she belonged, and before the days fishing began, I set her down on the mossy stones and watched her head pop out and her eyes come suddenly alive when she sensed her return to the Real Habitat. The last I saw of her, she had pushed off from the bank, and with powerful thrusts of her leathery legs, she disappeared into the murk of catfish and painted turtle habitat.

But she has lived all these years in my memory and imagination, and every time the last day of school rolls around, and June busts out all over, I think of her, my dear Eastern Painted Turtle I named Scratch. I can still hear the sound of her claws inside that cardboard box, and I can feel them digging like ice picks into my skin. I can't pick up a pair of cuticle scissors without thinking about tiny chopped worms. So the last day of school for me has always been a private holiday. Since 4th grade, it has been Scratch Day.

She was my messenger, but what was the message?

Well, of course, the turtle is a striking creature, carrying her shelter as she goes; she is nature's motor home, and from an early age most of us are captured by the sight of any turtle. Just yesterday morning, as I sat sipping coffee on a lovely stone footbridge that crosses a little pond on campus, I saw parents and children stop suddenly, family after family, to watch a pair of Painted Turtles sunning themselves on a log in the middle of the pond. Their shape is arresting, the shape of an Anasazi kiva dome, or a dark helmet shining in the sun against the gloomy surface of a pond. Our eyes are made to soak up forms such as theirs; they stop us in our tracks. And so it is that turtles seem to be both personal and mythical: they engage each of us, and all of us, seemingly for all time.

"Animals are all beasts of burden," said Henry Thoreau, "made to carry some portion of our thoughts." Turtles seem especially burdened. The Seneca Indians told of how the first People lived in the sky, until a sinful woman was cast out. As she careened through the air toward the water world below, some birds, seeing her fall, took pity and hastened to prepare a place for her to land. They dove into the water and found a turtle, buried, with mud thick on his back. They persuaded the turtle to swim quickly to the surface. When the woman landed on his broad carapace, vegetation suddenly sprung from the fertile mud. The earth world as we know it thus came into being.

To some American Indian tribes, the turtle is Trickster, apt to shift temporarily into human form and seduce young girls, who, when they learn of his true identity, often die of mortification, just as my daughter might die if a certain reptilian kid named Johnny Farnsworth ever asked her for another date while her friends were listening.

But part of the message given to me by my turtle was about boundaries—about the flimsy distinction between the "natural" and the "artificial," and the interpenetration of the wild and the tame. My girl Scratch probably walked downtown from a wetland somewhere near the city's edge. She couldn't have come up from the Conemaugh River flowing through the middle of town, because the Conemaugh was horribly polluted, a river of death from

sulfur-oxides and steel mill metals. She probably came out of a stream or bog nearby, and for God-knew-what-reason—perhaps the urgent need to find a mate—picked up her shell and headed down the tracks. Somewhere on her journey, she passed through a barrier which exists at least as much in our imagination as it does on the ground—a barrier separating the wild from the tame. *She* probably didn't know the difference, but I did, and that's why I stood so shocked and amazed for a long moment before I darted out into the street to rescue her. The message, over the years, has become simple and clear enough to me: it is my lot in life to leap that gap between the wild and the tame, to find the wild within the tame, and vice versa. I stand among those who cannot be content with a fully "humanized" world, a world left biologically depauperate as a result of our actions. I have a lifelong urge to save the wild things—rare or not, I don't really care—from the frenetic crush of humanity.

Scratch has become a metaphor for what is, in my mind, our principal struggle—the struggle to match the needs and demands of a greedy human society with the imperatives of nature, so that habitat exists for all, not merely for a single, deluded species who has the mental and emotional capacity to know better, but does not.

Scratch was the gateway for my first important insight into the lifelong question of Where We Stand. Where I stood then, I began to realize, was in a wild woods. You could look up from any open spot in our little city—the center of War Memorial Park downtown, for example—and see the wild, wooded hills at the edge of town. Our town—all hustle and bustle, and shopping, and cars, and delusion, and stinking industrial air—was just a little island in the middle of this great wild sea, and out of that sea, one June morning, walked a painted turtle. She was probably surprised to find a pathway as wide open as Messenger Street. Like a Cadillac, she could make good time on a street like that. I wondered what she thought when she smelled the asphalt and the tar. Did she think it was a new kind of mud? Did she believe she could use it to sprout a new world on her back?

In fact, I learned, those sexy woods teemed with what we today would call "biodiversity." And perhaps they still do—I really don't know, because it's been decades since I've had any intense engagement with them. I do know that we, and not any tur-

tle, did sprout a new world of asphalt and ideas, and we did so more or less upon others' backs, and those backs are breaking now. The breaking of nature's back shows up most dramatically in the loss of species around the world, and the coming radical impoverishment of ecosystems, which promises to reach epidemic proportions within the next two or three generations. Contrary to much ecological folk wisdom we hear often in places such as timber-dependent western Montana, or among those who seem to want all of Utah to become one enormous factory outlet mall, the world is becoming *more* rather than *less* impoverished ecologically.

But you'd never know it to listen to the gusts of ecological folk wisdom emanating from our many communities across the overworked American West.

One day last month, a prominent Wyoming state representative, who claims fourth generation credentials as a high plains rancher, excoriated me for remarks I had given at a gathering inside the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody. I had stood before an audience of about a hundred, mostly Wyomingites, and delivered an address not entirely complimentary toward the era of federal dam-building which has permanently altered the hydrology of the West, ruining most of the region's wild canyons. Poking a finger into my chest after I spoke, the Wyoming representative exclaimed, "Do you know how many species of fish were in Wyoming when my great-grandfather started irrigating here? One—the damned Cutthroat Trout. Do you know many there are now? I don't either, but it's at least a dozen." And he tried to name them. Walleyes, Northern Pike, two kinds of bass, Striped Perch, three kinds of sunfish, several species of imported trout, all more sporting than the cutthroat. "Biodiversity," he barked, "just ain't a problem."

The hearings records attached to wolf reintroduction in Yellowstone are replete with claims that wolves were "never present in Yellowstone." The high plateau was too cold, too barren, too devoid of prey, too this, too that to support any wolves. Wolves therefore would be an "unwanted, unnatural predator" inside the park.

But the emerging data on the alarming disappearance of species worldwide gives the lie to these confident proclamations of good times. *High Country*

News recently ran a heart-rending special issue on the plight of amphibians and reptiles in Utah.⁴ They are now as threatened as the biologists who dared to study them on behalf of the state fish and wildlife agency. The HCN articles are chilling in their portrayals of Utah legislators and high-level officials, boasting openly of their successful vendetta against scientists who dared to care for a few stupid frogs and tortoises—disgusting little beasts which seemed to block the path of suburban progress and fattening bank accounts.

When I think of little Scratch, I am all too aware that our proliferation of asphalt islands, our knitting together of endless archipelagos of commerce and agriculture to cover every inch of land, is the surest pathway we have to our own misery. We seem hell-bent on a worldwide effort to reduce all of nature to the demands of a single species, *Homo sapiens*. I don't know if or when that will lead to our extinction, but I am certain it will make us crazy with an existential grief most of us will suffer but not comprehend.



A decade and a half ago, the sociobiologist E.O. Wilson coined the term "biophilia" to describe humans' "innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes."⁵

"[T]o explore and affiliate with life is a deep and complicated process in mental development," he wrote. "To an extent still undervalued in philosophy and religion, our existence depends on this propensity, our spirit is woven from it, hope rises on its currents." Wilson pointed out that we seem to be genetically hard-wired into relationships with other species, that we behave, for example, as if we are imprinted with the need to alter landscapes to resemble tropical savannas. In nature, we esteem novelty and diversity. We name strikingly beautiful birds and butterflies after emperors, kings, monarchs. A hundred years ago, we began setting aside national parks to preserve their "natural curiosities," perhaps without awareness that we were simply obeying the imperatives of our own genes. "We are in the fullest sense a biological species," Wilson wrote, "and [we] will find little ultimate meaning apart from the remainder of life."⁶

Cambridge, 1984)

6 *Id* at 81

4. Todd Wilkinson, "Utah Ushers Its Frogs Toward Oblivion," *HIGH COUNTRY NEWS*, May 27, 1996.

5. Edward O. Wilson, *BIOPHILIA I* (Harvard University Press

But our biophilic imprint seems, of course, to be at constant war with other impulses. The most succinct way I know how to put it is that worldwide, at least since the late nineteenth century, human economy and nature's ecology don't seem to line up very well. We continue to operate most industrial economies worldwide under the rubric of a strict anti-ecological hierarchy. At the pinnacle of the pyramid stands humanity, still noble in its ignorance of nature—an ignorance that seems to span all boundaries in the "civilized" world, all nationalities, all modern economic systems, all modern religions. Perhaps the best we can say recently of our American generosity towards nature is that nature now gets its own channel on cable television, sandwiched somewhere among MTV, VH1, the Home Shopping Network and the all-sports channels. For all of our ritualistic hand-wringing over the deteriorating state of the natural world, we still treat practically every habitat on earth to some degree as a joint supply depot and dump.

Yes, we have made great progress with our designations of national parks, wildlife refuges, wilderness areas; but no, we haven't done nearly enough. Yes, we are the world's leader in natural resource conservation and the science that underpins it; no, we're not doing it all well enough.

In his superb new book *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions*, Montana author David Quammen names the enemies in humans' worldwide battle with our own biophilia: "massive habitat destruction, fragmentation, biological imperialism, inbreeding depression, loss of adaptability, decline of wild populations to unviable levels, ecosystem decay, trophic cascades, extinction, extinction, extinction."⁷ As E.O. Wilson gravely told us a decade and a half ago, none of this has anything to do with the normal background level of extinction and speciation. "Human destructiveness," he wrote "is something new under the sun."⁸ We have met the enemy, and it is the fuel-using mammal, *Homo extinctogenensis*. Biophilia may indeed be in our genetic architecture, but there's an awful lot eroding those foundations.

As I read Quammen's spirited 600-page elegy to the earth's vanishing natural heritage, I am struck by the numbers—by the appalling paucity of remnants of species that were once so wonderfully abundant.

The muriqui, largest of the New World monkeys, at home in the highly fragmented Brazilian Atlantic forest, is now down to about 700 individuals in scattered, relict colonies, with little hope of genetic communication among the several bands. Its numbers probably stood at around 400,000 when the first Portuguese arrived. The indri, grand ape of Madagascar, numbers about 80 in its principal reserve, the tiny Analamazaotra, not much bigger than Central Park. The grizzlies of Yellowstone, now numbering fewer than 300 and perched perilously on their shrinking habitat, as the residential-commercial-industrial spillover from Jackson Hole, Bozeman, Idaho Falls gradually laps at them. The name of the town, Island Park, Idaho, on the western border of Yellowstone now takes on new significance. *Island Park*, indeed. The Mauritius kestrel, a tentative success story of the South Pacific, saved, perhaps, from their precipitous decline to a mere eight known individuals by a kick-ass Welshman named Carl Jones, who took over the moribund kestrel project and brought U.S. Peregrine Fund techniques aggressively to the rescue.

These stories and many others offer alarm, insight, and even hope. As Carl Jones told David Quammen, if you can bring back the Mauritius kestrel, you can probably save anything.

Yet I am struck, as I read both Quammen and Wilson, at the number of times the word *minimum* crops up, relative to things which were abundant as recently as a generation or two ago. *Minimum viable population. Minimum critical size. Minimum stream flows.* Does our lexicon inadvertently reveal our attitude: that we will grudgingly relax our grip on the earth only enough to afford all others the minimum? Is this the natural heritage we're passing on to our children—the heritage of the minimum?

What's attacking biodiversity, when you blend it all down to an ugly gruel, are the forces of homogenization. These generally do not come forth with anyone's malicious intention; rather, they are byproducts of our efforts to live well—or to live at all. But knowing what we know today, when does a lack of action become malicious? In order to have our multi-storied, richly complex economy, our astounding panoply of consumer goods and services, we tend to make wild nature wherever we encounter it much simpler. The richness of the land

7. David Quammen, *SONG OF THE DODO: ISLAND BIOGEOGRAPHY IN AN AGE OF EXTINCTIONS* (Scribner: New York, 1996).

8. Wilson, at 122.

and sea feeds our economy, but often leaves the land and seas impoverished. As Quammen urgently puts it, "ecosystem decay, trophic cascades, extinction, extinction, extinction." Simplifying the countryside makes cities and towns more complex, but ultimately impoverishes and perhaps imperils all of us.



As a writer who focuses on the rapidly changing West, I'm always trying to pick up the cultural beat, trying to hear the faint drums that people are dancing to underneath all the surface din. I think we're feeling this loss of natural diversity, and it hurts, and some are beginning to fight it, often unconsciously, by acting out against it. For example, projecting strong images of *personal* "diversity" against the gloom of widespread homogeneity; "speciating," as it were, within our own ranks. As the natural world simplifies, perhaps dangerously, there is bound to be a lot of acting out against the forces of homogenization—just as during the Vietnam era during demonstrations, you commonly saw people plant flowers in soldiers' rifle barrels.

I often find myself speculating on what may be some early indications of the human response to ecosystem decay. I notice, for example, that in the very places where the media most loudly drums out the dark messages of ozone depletion, climate change, and extinction, various forms of "neo-tribalism" seem to be arising—and at least some of these appear unhealthy, even bizarre. I've been struck by the correspondence which seems to exist among virtual reality, body piercing and tattooing, gang membership, the creation of all new manner of private-access clubs and enclaves, and what I have come to call Internet worship. This last phenomenon interests me very much, for it is the most recent episode in a fifteen-year-long explosion in the use of personal computers, which have become not so much a tool as a cause.

Perhaps our inborn need to encounter biodiversity has now devolved into the simple, ceaseless demand for software—for an endless cavalcade of electronic "programs" that desperately try to satisfy our need to encounter novelty and diversity, the colorful, new forms and patterns of plants and animals against the dusky background of the mind's forest. Are these the electronic simulators

we need, now that we are a scant two generations removed from routine contact with the soil of Real Nature? Are we trying hard to make the best of an increasingly two-dimensional existence? Is there significance in the fact that all "searches" on our computers take place indoors, isolated from everyone and everything, except for fellow cyber-travelers?

As our transition away from daily contact with wild nature grows and deepens, we seem to be replacing it with a kind of "ecological" behavior applied to the consumer marketplace. Thus, as I watch my daughter begin to discover mall culture and take conformist delight at age 11 in cruising the stores with her buddies, the naturalist in me begins to kick in. I see her innately trained human eye making the finest possible distinctions among the thousands of brands of stuff; I see her and her friends picking their way through the vast economic diversity of their lives at the end of the twentieth century. Perhaps they are doing only what civilized humans in prosperous societies have always done: seeking out the finest among the finery; struggling with the minutia of surplus rather than the minutia of survival. But something in me sees another possibility altogether.

Perhaps in an ecological sense, we are perfectly prepared for the mall. We are adapted to get what we need and want by making highly refined judgments with our eyes, ears, noses, fingers. Our dispassionate stroll through the aisles of consumerism thus may resemble certain behaviors aimed at survival in a wild place. But a mall is not a wild place, and consumerism is not merely survival. Is it possible that in our replacement of ecology with economy, we have crossed beyond a barrier from which there is no return, either for us or for the ecosystems we are damaging terribly with our toxins, wastes, and patterns of extraction? The hallmark of wildness is self-sustainability, the capacity to regenerate through new, if unpredictable, responses to climactic change, cataclysm, invasion. Is our current fascination with the concept of "sustainability" an indication that in our hearts we realize the impossibility of it—the impossibility of a return to, or an advancement into, a way of living which is compatible with the evolved lifeways of the planet? Are we hearing the echo of our own extinction emanating from the future?

Whether we can stop the decline of species is a very open question, which I can't begin to answer. Why we would want to do it is closer to my domain. We would want to do it because, as Edward Wilson says, "on Earth no less than in space, lawn grass, potted plants, caged parakeets, puppies, and rubber snakes are not enough."⁹ Economic diversity is not enough. The mall is not enough. The property rights and blunt, irresponsible liberties demanded by Bible-thumping free-marketeers are not enough.

We would want to do it for the simple reason that on a June morning, on his way home from school on that last day, a boy has a sudden, thrilling urge to rush out into the street and save a beautiful reptile from certain death. Not a rare or threatened or endangered species, but simply a *different* species, an Other. The boy and the turtle may look at one another with little mutual comprehension, and the turtle may feel nothing about the boy, but the boy, we can be very certain, feels much for the turtle. What does he feel—what do any of us feel when we encounter the Other at close range?

9. *Id.* 118.

Well, love. Love of nature and of living. Love of one's own life. *Bio-philía*. Love of this tiny green and blue planet which seems so huge, which once seemed endless but is not. As Wilson tell us, there is a "naturalist's trance" akin to the "hunter's trance." There is a place in the mind reserved for the close, quiet contemplation of nature; the careers and lives of our great naturalists and ecologists tell us that that place is also full of love. When we see another tiny strand in the web, we somehow feel the entire web, ourselves included. Loving nature is self-love in the best and deepest sense—not the deluded, damaging love of narcissism or greed, but the kind of love which brings out our best and most creative powers. It is precisely the love expressed in the story of Kokopeli. God knows, Gaia knows, we need all of that we can get.