

## How to Hear a Whippoorwill

Mankind's natural future as an Adaptive Extremophile

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*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, but in my sixty-nine year lifetime human encroachment has continued to erode true wilderness into a few remnant pockets within a scattered network of small woodland "edge". Even though some very common—characteristically small and nonthreatening—human-adapted species masqueraded in these edge ecosystems as "diversity", species overall, in a world super-connected by tireless human movement, have been going extinct at an accelerating pace. The loss of big apex predators, and keystone species, greatly exacerbates this problem.

On the small subsistence farm where I grew up, just fifty years ago, there was a whippoorwill outside my bedroom window that 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 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 whippoorwills thrive, are merging into horizon to horizon monocrop deserts 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 own non-coevolved instruments.

So, here is the design layout for the whole-world orchestra I envision if we are to get 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 a school weekend, 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 island "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 ecological short-sightedness might really be more of a "blinkered" condition, and in this case it might simply consist in refusing to question the prevailing environmentalist paradigm, which assumes conservation fundamentally requires the reconnection of humans with Nature. I began to wonder if, rather than waving the "return to Nature" flag all the time, we should simply accept our un-Naturalness as *human nature*. 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, in the sense that this is the manifest destiny of an all-powerful "alien species". You see, the idea that we are *not a species at all*, in the ecological meaning,<sup>2</sup> 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 only way to counter the inevitably destructive ambitions of an absentee landlord is to stop reinforcing 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 the "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 proprietary rules?); we grow crops that suit us, but this necessarily means they are not allowed to coevolve, in the long run, among a diversity of other species (evolution needs *inter*-action and a *very* long run); and, increasingly, in our own 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.<sup>3</sup> But we can, “naturally”, take the long view of human-natural history, which makes it 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 a recent article,<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Jacquet makes this 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” here normally refers to a debilitating condition felt by holocaust survivors, but Jacquet goes on to suggest that we humans are ultimately governed by what psychiatrist Arnold Modell<sup>5</sup> 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; and, 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? If “species survival guilt” operates even at a subliminal level (I personally think it does), and especially if we're not convinced the “One with Nature” paradigm can save us, we can assume it might be comforting, at a superficial level, to hear that 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*, the Buddhist nun Pema Chodron<sup>6</sup> 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-and-fifty-thousand years our species has struggled to harvest what we see as “natural resources” that have, in ecological fact, been coevolved to efficiently serve only a wild but regulated flourishing. And we, with technologies unregulated by Nature, have increasingly failed to contribute to this flourishing in a dependable, or even positive, way.

Of course, in the beginning, it wasn't easy for us either, but our lives *have* gotten easier, and steadily easier, and the flourishing has suffered in consequence. In fact, if we were not so mistrustful about sharing these resources fairly amongst ourselves (do we suspect, at some inchoate level, that we are a culture of ecological thieves?) we could now *all* have it easier than any other species evolved “from the war of nature, from famine and death”. (This is all so un-Natural that we sometimes misrepresent Darwin's co-evolutionary flourishing to advance our very private hoarding of wealth.) Right now we can live anywhere we want to 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 vents, or under polar ice caps. So maybe now we *can* afford to start rewilding some of the more fertile parts of the planet that we stripped and plowed, or paved, and that we really don't *need* as much as other species do. 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. I have argued elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> 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 we must be more deliberate about disentangling our habitats from Nature’s if we want the grandchildren to hear a whippoorwill, or a chorus of wolves. And we can do it, because we’ll be making the easiest choice of all; 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.

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