

# The Commodification of Wildness and its Consequences

Four Legged Human

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# Pastoralists, Markets, ‘Green’ Capitalism, and Species Extinction

We had been tracking the rhinoceros since the day before. The plan was to walk into the mopani, roughly following the course of the river so as to maintain proximity to a source of water, letting the animal tracks guide us wherever they took us. We camped in a meadow, home to an elder baobab tree, and in the morning resumed tracking our rhino. Ian is an expert tracker and every time it seemed we had lost the track in the grass, or the smudge of more recent impala or buffalo tracks, he would carefully make his readings and pick up the rhino again. Excitement ran through our minds and bodies in anticipation of our coming encounter with her.

“Don’t move” whispered Ian suddenly. We stood in silence, eyes wide, intently listening to the sounds of the veld. Satisfied we weren’t being watched, Ian motioned us over to see what had caused his abrupt attentiveness. There, perfectly clear in the red dirt, was a fresh track made by a tennis shoe. Somebody else was on the trail of our rhino. We all knew who this person was; a dangerous and hostile enemy of rhino and, equally, a great threat to us; rhino poachers, those who kill for horns to be sold in the Asian black market.

If these hostiles were to find the rhino it would surely be killed, stripped of its horns and left to rot in the hot sun of the African veld. If the poachers discovered us on their trail they would either run, or if feeling cornered, attempt to kill us as well. So our rhino tracking ended and we retreated back to the shelter of the river bank. Ian pulled out his satellite phone and made a call. “I’ve got fresh human tracks on top of fresh rhino tracks here” he reported. At dusk that night we went down to the river for water. In the distance I could see silhouettes of men with rifles slowly and quietly stalking up the river corridor towards our camp. Soon a group of men fully outfitted in military tactical assault gear were in our camp talking with Ian, getting all of the information he could provide them on the whereabouts, age, and direction of the tracks. Then this anti-poaching squad armed with assault rifles and grenades disappeared silently into the night, on the hunt for rhino poachers.

The next morning, as we moved away from the area in order to lessen our exposure to any hostilities, we heard gunfire in the distance. I still don’t know what actually happened. But I like to think that it was the poachers who got shot up and not the rhino. In fact, I like to think that us venturing across the veld at the time saved that rhino from being slaughtered for profit, at least for the time being.

Most experts agree that, in the face of a powerful poaching network administered by such entities as the Chinese and Vietnamese mafias, the remaining species of wild rhinoceros have little chance of not going extinct within the coming few decades<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For example see <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/10/141020-rhinoceros-death-suni-kenya-science-world-endangered-animals/> and <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/extinction-countdown/2013/11/13/western-black-rhino-extinct/>.

Although the anti-poaching squads have received millions of dollars in funding from various conservation interests they can't keep up with the poachers and many speculate that the war against rhino poaching will prove futile, that the myth of rhino horn being an effective aphrodisiac in Chinese medicine has become irrefutable dogma for elite classes of Asian males, that the market is just too powerful, that the lure of a few hundred dollars for local ex-military riflemen come poacher for the horn cartels is just too strong<sup>2</sup>. After all, a military trained African peasant could make \$300 a year as a farmer/herder, but could pocket \$3000 a year as a rhino poacher. A few successful rhino kills means the poacher becomes the wealthiest man in his village and along with that power, prestige, cars, and a smartphone.

Who could argue? We're all just fighting for an equal piece of the pie. Occupy Wall-Streeters' are fighting for the same things: a share of the wealth, the ability to purchase industrial food, buy plastic consumer goods, pay a monthly smartphone bill, and obtain whatever else has been deemed necessary for 'survival' in the 21st century.

But the rhino poacher in Africa lays a lot more on the line than does the American leftist struggling for his piece of the pie against capitalists on Wall Street. Officially poachers are supposed to be captured and put on trial but, as it was explained to me, behind the scenes a decision has been made to initiate a shoot-to-kill policy on rhino poachers as it is now believed by officials that the only hope of saving the rhino from extinction is to instill in every poacher a fear that they will surely be killed themselves if they happen to be caught trying to poach a rhinoceros.

Which side are you on? The side of wild nature? Or the side of civilized humanity? I myself am on the side of preserving what is left of wild nature and defending what is left of human wildness at all costs<sup>3</sup>. And it seems at this point the logical conclusion of the agendas of both the political left and right are purely humanist and futurist. Either agenda, if seen to fruition, can only lead to the complete totalitarian domestication of the planet and the human species. And, at this stage, without totalitarian annihilation of wildness it does not seem that we can keep eight billion capitalists and wanna-be capitalists alive on this planet.

Most of those who care about the rhino will argue that we need to incentivize its protection by making it valuable as a source of local ecotourism income. This isn't the only 'green' capitalism strategy proposed to save the rhino. A second market-based approach is to domesticate a population of rhinos and farm them in order to produce rhino horn for the Asian market and thus reduce pressure on wild rhinos. This may allow elite Asian men eternal access to rhino horn potion, but it is nonetheless a repeat of the same old story of domestication and commodification which creates wealth for a

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<sup>2</sup> Many of the rhino poachers are veterans of the Angolan wars and other armed conflicts.

<sup>3</sup> It is logical to anticipate accusations of ecofascism as a reaction to the stance I have framed here. In response, perhaps we should inform our accusers that accusing us of being ecofascists because of our total allegiance to wildness over civilized humanity simply amounts to our accusers being full-fledged Manifest Destiny anthrofascists.

select few and wreaks havoc on planet earth. These are microcosms of the fundamental status quo argument that the market is the only useful tool for saving the planet.

Let's just say that these proposed measures did save the rhino. This would mean that somewhere else a growth-oriented industrial-tech society must exist, a society which has the wealth to travel to Africa to view rhinos in the wild and/or to pay a premium price for rhino horn products. For such a society to afford to participate in this their source of wealth must come from some other high impact activity, decimating some other bioregion. To become an eco-tourist one needs to be paid, and to be paid, someone somewhere needs to be developing capital. Thus conservationists who promote these 'green' capitalism schemes are simply externalizing the impacts of commodification to elsewhere. Either of these measures amount to externalizations of costs and either way wild species will continue to go extinct.

The drive to exploit and destroy wildness in exchange for wealth, status, and prestige is nothing new. In fact it is inherent to the mindset of the African pastoralist cultures from which the modern poachers originate. Farmers and their pastoral trading partners have always been the enemies of wildness. The African peasants who have been recruited by the poaching cartels originate inside of cultures that in all of their known history have maintained heavy-handed regimes of domestication, expansion, and war, rooted in long standing trajectories of resource commodification for the purposes of producing a surplus of goods to be used for enhancing the power and wealth of elite tribal headman and their direct kin<sup>4</sup>.

The Bantu pastoralist tribes were at war with wildness when they began invading southern Africa from the north three thousand years ago<sup>5</sup>. Lions, leopards, elephants, anything which got in the way of their expanding pastoralism, anything that might eat their cattle, were viewed as savage enemies. Viewed equally as enemies standing in the way of pastoralist progress were the San hunting cultures whom had made home in the region for at least seventy thousand years<sup>6</sup>. Never before encountering a domesticated animal, if a San hunter came across a cow he would very likely hunt the cow and kill it for food, with no concept that the cow was the property of the Bantu tribes. In retaliation the Bantu began hunting down the San<sup>7</sup>. For thousands of years prior to

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<sup>4</sup> It is probably important to note here that many African chieftains were highly complicit middlemen in the European slave trade, selling off their own slaves won by war, and raiding less powerful groups to round up more. In the process, these elite headmen became increasingly wealthy and powerful. For a brief example see Stern, S.M. 2007. *It's time to face the whole truth about the Atlantic slave trade*. George Mason University.

<sup>5</sup> Clark, J. D. and S. A. Brandt. 1984. *From Hunters to Farmers: The Causes and Consequences of Food Production in Africa*. University of California Press.

<sup>6</sup> Newman J.L.1995. *The Peopling of Africa: A Geographic Interpretation*, Yale University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Later, but for the same reasons, 'bushman hunting' became a favorite sporting pastime of the Dutch Afrikaner colonists. Much has been written on this history. A quick read on the plight of the San is National Geographic's '*Bushman*' overview by P. Godwin: <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0102/feature6/fulltext.html>. Also see: Wells, S. 2002. *The journey of man: a genetic odyssey*. Princeton University Press.

the current rhino crises the descendants of the modern poachers were capitalizing and expanding by domesticating, doing away violently with any wild human or beast which got in the way.

## The Roots of Commodification

No matter what form, the entire paradigm of resource commodification is connected to delayed return economics (here defined as production and utilization of a surplus for purposes of storage and trade), as opposed to immediate return economics (the utilization of resources for immediate and direct use by the producers)<sup>8</sup>. Delayed return economics can be viewed as a spectrum of resource utilization, with subsistence oriented food and material storage at one end, and storage oriented towards commodification and wealth accumulation at the opposite end. Activities at either end of this spectrum have the potential to evolve into an undesirable set of circumstances. The particular focus of this essay, however, is the consequences of the latter more advanced and expansive mode of delayed return activity<sup>9</sup>.

Utilization of a surplus for commodification is representative of a dangerous evolution for any socioecological system. Commodification is a trigger point for expanding authoritarianism, mass-ecological alienation, the reification of physical and psychological needs, and socioecological overshoot. I argue that realization of the above

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<sup>8</sup> I want to make clear that in this essay I am not referring to delayed return in the context of storing food for later direct consumption by a community. In the context of our modern sedentary predicament, as well as in the context of differing regional climatic conditions, it is my assertion that there is a distinct difference in outcomes between storing food for direct consumption at the household level and storing a surplus to be used for commerce.

<sup>9</sup> James Woodburn brilliantly developed the concept of immediate return/delayed return analysis and defined delayed return as a system where “people hold rights over valued assets of some sort, which either present a yield, a return for labour applied over time or, if not, are held and managed in a way which resembles and has similar social implications to delayed yields on labour”. Woodburn assigned delayed return as being responsible for the evolution of “load bearing relationships” in a society and posited that hierarchy is a natural corollary to situations where people are required to “build up, secure, protect, manage and transmit delayed yields on labour”. (Pages 32-33, Woodburn, J. 1988. *African hunter gatherer social organization: is it best understood as a product of encapsulation?*. In *Hunters and Gatherers Volume 1: history, evolution, and social change*. Eds. Ingold, T., Riches, D., and J. Woodburn. Berg Publishers.) I posit that storage is more complex than being a simple delayed return to commodification trigger and that it is possible for long term storage to occur at egalitarian levels, especially in regards to nomadic hunting and foraging in cold climates. Nomadically accessed winter caches were abundant in the indigenous arctic and sub-arctic. Small bands stored dried salmon in underground pits for the winter, caribou, seals, walrus, and whale were cached in stone pits and permafrost dug-outs, berries and plants were stored overwinter in seal skin pokes filled with seal oil. Hunters and fishers would know the location of distant caches and would revisit them for food during nomadic travels or in the spring during “starvation time”. As such, it seems logically possible to store food and not trigger commodification as a result. If we view delayed return on a sliding scale, storage for trade and wealth accumulation is the more extreme and consequential version.

consequences does not necessarily require domestication or agriculture, as many anti-civilization activists have posited, but only requires commodification at relatively rudimentary levels for the potential to evolve towards socio-ecological crisis. Several factors are likely at play regarding a society's evolution towards practicing a mode of commodification but for our discussion here I propose we look to specialization and associated division of labor as critical starting points on a linear trajectory towards the practice of commodification<sup>10</sup>, the premise being that when a specialist of any type becomes the only person within a group who can provide a necessary good or service, a foundation is developed for class division and incentives comes to exist for specialists to grow wealth and power.<sup>11</sup> Specialization in a craft has the potential to create oppressive power dynamics if common people become dependent on specialists that utilize specialization as a means to build power through commodification of the goods being produced. Here we find a strong possibility for the rise of primitive forms of accumulation, occurring at the point where a wild resource is stored and commodified for use in trade practices meant to grow the wealth of an individual. Egalitarianism fades with increasing accumulation, because in this practice some person or group always gets the upper hand.

Various arguments have been made that spiritual specialization could be one of the earliest forms of evolving hierarchy, with shamans representing the original hucksters<sup>12</sup>. With a realization that economic advantage could be gained from specializing in various

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<sup>10</sup> The evolution of symbolic thought is also an important factor always worth consideration, but for the sake of brevity it will not be considered to any depth here.

<sup>11</sup> There is an argument that commodification only occurred with the rise of domestication and the ownership of property. I believe in certain cases there is validity to this analysis. For my purposes here I want to explore the possibility that, when specialization is allowed to run amuck, commodification can just as easily occur within culture's that have not developed domestication.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the eminent human ecologist Paul Shepard lamented that in some cases "shamanism tended to diminish individual self-reliance, the significance of the personal fast, vision, and guardian animal..." and that as shamanism evolved into more complex forms it initiated "an ego-centered shift from the old, egalitarian band existence, with its mood of accommodation to the natural world, toward the centralized magic of the shaman, with a concomitant rise in his political power". (Shepard P. and B. Sanders. 1985. *The sacred paw: the bear in nature, myth, and literature*. Viking. Pg 96, 124). Such views remain controversial however, especially due to the persecution of Siberian shamans by the Soviet Union, as a result of an analysis by Soviet scholars that an original 'primitive communism' was destroyed by the shaman who "purposely deceived and cheated his fellow men in order to live luxuriously at their expense" (Willerslev, R. 2007. *Soul hunters: hunting, animism, and personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs*. University of California Press) (see also: *Shamanism in Siberia*. 1978. Edited by V. Dioszegi and M. Hoppal and Forsyth, J. 1992. *A History of the peoples of Siberia: Russia's North Asian colony*. Cambridge University Press, and Vitebsky, P. 2005. *The reindeer people: living with animals and spirits in Siberia*. Mariner Books). Despite the controversy, specific cases of spiritual specialization in indigenous society should be viewed individually on their own merits. My analysis leads me to believe that the rise of spiritual specialization in hunter-gatherer societies should remain subject to scrutiny by people concerned with the foundations of both power and commodification. At the very least I see a strong case for rejecting spiritual specialization of any kind within our contemporary movements. All 21st century new age spiritual gurus should be viewed as suspect.

rituals which professed a power to control the forces of nature and the spirits of the animals which the people relied upon to live, it is logical to grasp how the spiritual specialist easily could become too powerful if people came to believe that this person had real influence over the natural world. In this process the shaman learns how to turn supposed spiritual influence into a commodity that can be exchanged for both political and material capital<sup>13</sup>. As the shaman's power grows he receives tidings from the producing class (the hunters and foragers). Eventually through this process the shaman commodifies the performance of healing ceremonies and rituals and thus begins amassing power and wealth.

This is not to say that manipulation and commodification is the case in every occurrence of spiritual specialization. Certainly there are cases where a gifted person practiced shamanism and healing within an egalitarian context. Likely reminiscent of the primal human spiritual praxis are cases such as the Siberian Yukaghir animists for whom "shamanic specialization is a question of *degree*...the shaman's activity and experience, rather than being some kind of mysticism at the disposal of a particular religious elite, is a specialized form of what any other member of society is capable of doing<sup>14</sup>". For Yukaghir hunters "concrete bodily processes of perception and experience" at the individual level are seen as primary "rather than exaggerated or enhanced control of abstract religious representations, signs, and symbols<sup>15</sup>". Concomitantly, Yukaghir hunters maintain a direct and unmediated connection with the living wildness they inhabit alongside animals and spirits, "all of whom are understood to be mimetic doubles of one and other<sup>16</sup>." The deep participatory spiritualities entirely rooted in place cultivated by these circumstances are atrophied by increasing specialization, the reduction of the healer to the far more pervasive role of a commodifier channeling spirituality toward imperial ambitions, a few generations of shamans evolving into a powerful family that controls access to resources and spiritual realms without ever physically domesticating them.

Based on historical knowledge of various indigenous peoples, it is likely that among the earliest humans small trades or gifting occurred for simple negotiation of peace with a neighboring band, for example. But an evolved dependency on accumulation for trade – both at the inter-band and intra-band levels, may be representative of a point where surplus production, commodification, and trade become necessary for the actual survival of a people. Here a group of people or an individual person becomes physically and/or psychologically dependent upon some type of hierarchy for survival,

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<sup>13</sup> The supposed medical benefits of rhino horn stem back to this type of huckster spiritual specialization. Rhino horn was being sold for a premium by Asian Silk Road traders one thousand years ago and the origins of the trade are likely rooted in a more ancient practice of rhino horn commodification. Today certain practitioners of Chinese medicine continue to profit immensely from rhino horn huckstering.

<sup>14</sup> Willerslev. Pg. 124

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, Pg. 124

<sup>16</sup> Ibid



dependent for some type of good or service that can only be provided by a specialist, or dependent on a previously unneeded resource that can only be supplied through trade.

As this process plays out in a society, not only does it drastically shift relationships between humans and wildness, it also drastically shifts relationships among individuals within human communities. Here specialists, no longer generalist producers with direct on-the-ground full-spectrum holistic relationships with wildness, have domesticated themselves and the once free hunters have been duped into becoming dependent on elitist commodification specialists. This may well have been the beginning of our social and ecological crisis: one person in the group figures out how to specialize in a specific trade, divides the labor, tricks the common people into becoming his dependents, thereby amassing power and wealth through commodification. Endangered rhinos, 50+% biodiversity loss, the Anthropocene, the sixth great extinction - all to follow.

## The Catastrophic Feedback Loop of Delayed Return Dependency

“The commodification of wildness is the beginning and the end of civilization”. - Kevin Tucker

Indigenous Native America is riddled with examples of social and ecological devastation occurring as a result of resource harvest patterns shifting from subsistence orientations to trade orientations, in both the colonial and pre-colonial contexts. Not too long after the Plains Indian bison hunting cultures obtained horses through the Spaniards, countless Great Plains bison were killed for the purposes of trading their tongues and their hides for European goods<sup>17</sup>. Plains Indians simultaneously became dependent upon equestrian domestication and dependent upon trade for European goods, rifles becoming a particularly desired commodity. Inter- and intra-tribal conflicts increased as a result. Warfare and raids became more numerous as equestrians were able to cover vast areas in competition for resources and control of territory. Violence increased dramatically as native peoples experienced the surge of mass commodification moving west<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> For example see: Isenberg, A.C. 2000. *The destruction of the bison*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>18</sup> There is also ample evidence that in certain cases access to industrial goods and markets decreased the occurrence of sometimes incessant pre-colonial Native American warfare. While these are certainly legitimate historical accounts, manifest destiny oriented political interests often use this as an argument that life becomes easier and more peaceful within civilization, because with access to industrial goods incentives for tribal raiding no longer exist. Nevertheless, almost all documented cases of post-colonial Native American warfare are related in some way to increasing involvement in commodification. For numerous accounts of both pre-colonial and post-colonial Native American warfare see: R.J. Chacon,

Fur trapping is another important example of the heavy impacts to traditional social relations and traditional approaches to economics initiated by commodification<sup>19</sup>. During the eighteenth century when Russian traders invaded the Aleutian Islands off the Alaska Peninsula, the Aleut people were forced into sea otter hunting on a massive scale for the Russian fur trade. The Aluets were expert sea otter hunters and had used sea otters for fur and food for centuries prior to the Russian arrival. Skilled as the Aleuts were, the Russians forced them into servitude in sea otter pelt production by holding their wives and children hostage, raping the women regardless, and threatening to kill them if the men did not produce enough fur<sup>20</sup>. As a result of their settled, delayed return orientation the Northwest Coast tribes maintained strong traditions of warfare, slave raiding, head hunting, and ritualized violence well prior to conquest. Nonetheless, involvement in the colonial fur trade seems to have greatly exacerbated such practices by these groups. According to anthropologist Joan Lovisek:

*Slaves were always important to Northwest Coast cultures prior to and after contact, but the economic importance of slaves escalated after 1830, as warfare changed to opportunistic, individualistic predatory raiding. Slaves were ransomed for trade goods or sold to other groups for furs, which could then be exchanged for trade goods. For many groups...it was easier to obtain trade goods by predatory raiding than by trading, trapping, or hunting animals for furs<sup>21</sup>.*

When Euro-American authorities began to round up the remaining free Indians and confine them to reservations part of the deal for the surrender of their hunting grounds was a guarantee to an allocation of “commodities” by the US government, industrial food products to replace the wild foods that, without access to land, would no longer be available to Indians. Today “commodities” are still distributed by the BIA to Native Americans in Indian country. Indians mention commodity foods with ire and disgust, because of the debilitating health effects of these foods and because of the history of forced dependence on them for survival.

Just prior to the formation of Indian reservations, as Native American self-sufficiency was being annihilated by the effects of colonization and increasing numbers of Indians were becoming dependent upon European industrial goods, those who gave up on resistance were referred to as “loaf about the forts” by the bands who continued to hunt and gatherer for their food while simultaneously waging an armed resistance against the US military. The “loaf about the forts” were those Indians who stopped hunting and resisting and surrendered themselves as dependents to Uncle Sam and

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and R.G. Mendoza. 2007. *North American indigenous warfare and ritual violence*. The University of Arizona Press. Also see: C.G. Calloway, 2006. *One vast winter count: the Native American west before Lewis and Clark*. Bison Books.

<sup>19</sup> For example see: Sandoz, M. 1978. *The beaver men: spearheads of empire*. Bison Books.)

<sup>20</sup> Gross, J.J. and S. Khera. 1980. *Ethnohistory of the Aleuts*. Department of Anthropology University of Alaska Fairbanks.

<sup>21</sup> Lovisek, J.A. 2007. *Aboriginal warfare on the Northwest Coast: did the potlatch replace warfare?* Pages 59-73 in Chacon and Mendoza.

thus spent their days groveling about the Cavalry forts in search of commodity hand-outs<sup>22</sup>. These are but few examples of the circumstances which led to a near total dependence on world-system industrial goods now defining the economies of all of the remaining northern Native American peoples.

We know that many pre-colonial indigenous peoples fully embraced delayed return and commodification, with hierarchy, property ownership, territorial warfaring, and slavery as the corollary<sup>23</sup>. The maintenance of trading alliances likely made some groups more secure from outside threats and more resilient in the face of scarcity and/or ecological change, by providing a safety net to fall back on for obtaining an actually necessary good in the case of an inability to obtain that good independently. However, here we start walking on shaky ground because the differences between psychological wants and actual needs end up falling into very murky cultural grey areas. If a band of ancient hunters happened to kill a large mammal they may very well have given a portion to another band in exchange for something else, so it is not unlikely that small scales of exchange have existed among humans for hundreds of thousands of years. However, sharing or exchanging at this level does not mean that a group becomes dependent upon killing animals as a means to produce commodities to exchange for other goods necessary to their actual survival. Consequently, a people becoming dependent upon trade for survival seems to represent one critical non-grey-area shifting point from subsistence to delayed return orientations.

The process by which thousands of years of indigenous self-sufficiency comes to be annihilated by contact with industrial goods and ensuing dependence upon commodification can be clearly viewed throughout the global ethnographic record. The record makes clear that when societies become oriented to commodification a positive feedback loop is initiated which forces dependence upon increasing commodification for survival. In that process, as people became dependent upon, say a firearm for hunting, the skills to make hunting weapons from local materials are often lost and game can no longer be harvested without access to industrially manufactured firearms and ammunition. In order for such hunters to survive on the land, they have no choice but to participate in commodification in order to produce a surplus to exchange for whatever world-system goods they have become dependent upon. An important conservation mechanism exists here because when actual needs are not reified, and the production of a surplus for trade is thus not required, impacts to surrounding wildness are minimized<sup>24</sup>. However, when surplus production becomes the mode, a positive feedback loop is initiated where self-sufficient cultures and the wildness they depend on must ultimately be shattered

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<sup>22</sup> Sandoz, M. 1992. *Crazy Horse: the strange man of the Oglalas*. Bison Books.

<sup>23</sup> Examples can be found in Chacon, R.J., and R.G. Mendoza. 2007 and Calloway, C.G. 2006, as well as Adams, E.W.A. 1991. *Prehistoric Mesoamerica. Third Edition*. University of Oklahoma Press, among many other works.

<sup>24</sup> There may be situations where dependence upon outside goods lessens ecological impacts at the local scale for a period of time, but as discussed above, earth is essentially a closed loop system and the requirement for goods at larger than local scales implies externalizations of impacts to other localities.

in order to maintain the inputs stemming from increasing dependence upon outside goods, technology, and market economics.

As societies cross the threshold from immediate return to trade oriented delayed return a hard boundary is crossed between socio-ecological sustainability and eventual overshoot<sup>25</sup>. Less advanced forms of delayed return dependency ultimately evolved into agriculture. The record clearly shows that surplus production oriented farming models with a propertied class of large producers whom control surplus and rely on market models to exchange surplus for wealth accumulation tend to evolve unsustainably and eventually lead to both ecological and social overshoot. The Central American corn growing civilizations are one example among many<sup>26</sup>.

In the agrarian and industrial worlds, the process by which capitalists suck up small producers and turn them into dependent serfs has been ongoing throughout known history. Elites prey on the production of surplus by commoners and accumulated surplus ends up being controlled by a select class. Wealth accumulation by elites continuously drives directives for increased production because continuous production of surplus is necessary for wealth production. Social overshoot originates with the debilitating psychological effects that this trajectory inevitably has on all sectors of society. The need for excess production forces commoners to labor harder and harder, suffering immensely both emotionally and physically as a result. A lack of engagement in production by elites translates to extreme alienation from social and ecological reality leading to burgeoning sociopathic tendencies and a deepening reification of needs. Because wealth accumulation and its concomitant growth mentality eventually necessitates overshoot, gains in security and power by elite classes are temporary, through time they dig their own graves in a paranoid, hyper-domesticated obsession for control.

In summary, the long-term results are generally socially and ecologically catastrophic whenever a group of people becomes reliant on trade for their survival. Anytime a self-sufficient foraging and hunting peoples have fallen into this trap it has led down a path to hell both for them and the wildness they once thrived within. Evolved physical and psychological reliance on commodification results in a loss of traditional skills and ultimately domestication. People devolve to a trance state, extending all of their life's mental and physical effort in an effort to fulfill reified needs. This process has occurred throughout all known civilized history and defines the point where most of us are today – ultra-domesticated and 100% dependent on commodification for our survival.

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<sup>25</sup> The onset of overshoot occurs at varying temporal scales, spanning decades to thousands of years. Nonetheless, once the boundary is crossed socioecological collapse is inevitable.

<sup>26</sup> See: Adams, E.W.A. 1991.

# Transitioners, Permaculturalists, and Other ‘Green’ Hucksters

“It seems that we still need to learn that the problem is not who the capitalist is, the problem is that there is a capitalist at all”. - Richard Wolff

The crisis which confronts us and the earth today is rooted in the commodification of wildness proliferated across nearly the entire planet, and the rewilding, locavores are not exempt. Every last remaining ecologically adapted and balanced wild and free thing on earth now risks the threat of commodification. From carbon trading schemes, to ‘green’ products, to eco-tourism, to rhino farming etc., many on the environmental left believe that commodifying wildness in one way or another is the only way forward to save us and the planet. They find it far less threatening to play the shaman’s game, rather than fight it, because they too are under its spells of dependence, its fear mongering that they shall never survive without its blessings. Not only are many of these folks in the business of commodifying physical wildness into products for sale or products for viewing/experiencing, they also work hard to commodify what’s left of human wildness. Wild experiences within the body are sold to be guided by recreational experts. Wilderness therapy, as necessary as it is, is now commodified and sold by the industrialized mental health care system, more guru huckstering, capitalizing off the ultra-domesticated masses.

The fact is that virtually all of us are entirely dependent on commodification for our survival at this point, that none of us now have the ability to be fully self-sufficient. Folks have children to raise and families to support and playing the game is somewhat unavoidable for the time being. As a result a portion of our future resilience now partly depends upon our involvement, but shall we just accept this as an inevitable facet of reality and go on designing the future pathways of our children around the tyranny of commodification?

Within the ever growing ecological/economic-reality movement people are recognizing that we must absolutely transition to a different way of living. Yet, dominant across the spectrum of these movements is a general refusal to recognize the roots of the problem. Virtually every proposed solution to the crisis involves some form of commodification. Amongst the ‘small-green-enterprise’ minded transitioners, there appears to be unquestionable support for commodification in the face of a history which informs us that the likelihood that a privileged, wealth amassing, expansionist class is bound to grow within these ‘small-green’ enterprises – a demon in our midst.

While parts of the permaculture movement are based in small-scale immediate return thinking<sup>27</sup>, much of it seems to be riddled with delayed return aspirations. Permaculturalists continuously refer to their projects as business ideas. “Financial Perma-

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<sup>27</sup> Archaeological and ethnographic research has shown it likely that various forms of immediate return oriented permaculture/food forest cultivation were practiced by some indigenous groups well before and long after the establishment of large scale domestication and agriculture. Nevertheless, peoples

culture” is the buzzword and it generally revolves around entrepreneurship within the context of capitalism. One of the permaculture principles is to “obtain a yield”. Just how large of a yield? Are there limits? What do you plan to do with that yield? As your business/food producing monopoly grows and wildness gets in the way, what then? At what point does the integrity of permaculture Zone 5 take precedence?

Today with some landholding ‘permaculture’ farmers turning their large yields into big organic produce business we can see where this is going – a leftist propertied class that controls food production and who could theoretically enslave into debt bondage their constituents who have no land with which to produce their own food. As the leviathan continues to crumble and the ‘transition’ occurs are the successful local growers going to relinquish positions of power and assist with bringing on food production in a collective manner? I have spent a fair amount of time within permaculture circles and based upon my experiences I see this as highly unlikely. All-in-all, we find most of the folks involved with today’s various transitional movements idealizing the agrarian societies of the pre-industrial era simply because they existed at smaller more locally self-sufficient scales, while forgetting how alienating, feudal, and socially unsustainable these agrarian arrangements actually were. After all, these arrangements ultimately brought us to the terrifying global state of affairs we are in now.

Sadly, I now hear that even amongst so-called primitivists, rewilders, and green anarchists’ schemes are being designed to sell wildness.

In my area there is a burn-site which consistently produced an abundance of wild morel mushrooms over the years since the fire. Local foragers would make an annual pilgrimage to the spot and harvest morels for personal use and there were always plenty to go around. Then non-local commercial pickers got word of the location, ‘back-to-nature’ people from Washington and Oregon. On the 11 mile bike ride into the burn my companions and I came across several strangers of the commercial picker type on their way out carrying backpacks, obviously filled with morels harvested for the market. When we arrived at the burn and began looking around all we found were hundreds of broken hollow stems in the dirt. Because these noble back-to-the-landers are earning an independently generated income through being closer to wild nature shall I celebrate them? Absolutely not. They are nothing but Takers, not ultimately cultivating dependence on wildness for their survival but further dependence upon industrialism and the market. They will exchange their harvest for cash to buy what? The burn could easily have handled subsistence foraging by a few more small local groups. Yet as soon as the delayed return folks showed up the resources were gone.

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who practiced horticulture and did not eventually commoditize the produce in some manner are the minority. Also, I want to make clear that my critique here does not apply to all those who practice permaculture. There are certainly people involved with permaculture who understand the consequences of commodification and who are striving to enact alternative models. Part of the problem is that permaculture as a concept has grown to the point where it has been coopted by status quo leftists and environmentalists, groups of people who have a general track record of failing to acknowledge critical realities which force them to think and act outside their comfort zones.

In the spirit of our prehistoric immediate return ancestors, our band of subsistence foragers would do well to drive them out if they show up again at the burn.

I hunt for much of my food and I have several friends who do the same. But it is not difficult at all to find people who originate from formerly immediate return hunting cultures, or who originally became interested in hunting for the purposes of becoming more self-sufficient and developing deeper relations with wild nature, falling into commodification traps in their hunting practices. I often hear of native hunters selling animal parts for cash, trading polar bear hides for weapons, drugs, and alcohol is one example that comes to mind, as well as the killing of walrus only to sell their ivory tusks, and the selling of bear gall bladders in the Asian black market. Recently a friend of mine killed a mountain goat and called me boasting about how he sold its hide to a taxidermist for a thousand bucks and said that with such a prosperous return he plans to now always sell his hides to taxidermists to pay for his future hunting expenses. But where does this mentality lead? To a dependence upon harvesting animals for cash and the commodification of wildness. Once this dependency is forged, first due to a love of the hunting life and the closeness to wild nature it brings, some hunters turn to guiding wealthy trophy hunters as a source of income. This creates a dependency on maintaining a certain number of kills in order to keep clients happy. Guides battle for territory and attempt to monopolize whatever resources are there. Dentists from Chicago go home with heads to put on their walls. Local subsistence hunters go another year without food to feed their families.

The above examples of modern wild resource commodification can be described as relatively small-scale when compared to other modern occurrences. It would be helpful to look at the cultural and economic evolution of commercial fishing for a view of the consequences of bumping the small-scale commodification of wildness up to larger-scale global market levels. Marine biologists assert that 90% of world's large species ocean fishery stocks have been depleted since industrialism<sup>28</sup>. Commercial fisherman are generally steadfast to proclaim their spiritual connection to the seas and label their practices "sustainable", but they need massive amounts of cash and fuel to keep their operations up and running. Today in Alaska a commercial fishing community is battling heavily against the proposed development of the world's largest open pit gold and copper mine at the headwaters of the world's largest remaining unaltered wild salmon river. Northern Dynasty Minerals, a Canadian company with links to the global mega-mining-corporation Rio Tinto, has developed a marketing campaign for their development of the mine centered around the fact that commercial fisherman need access to industrial metals too, if they wish to maintain the equipment necessary to stay in business at global market scales<sup>29</sup>. Northern Dynasty certainly has a point, one to which the commercial fisherman have no viable response. Yet, the ancestors

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<sup>28</sup> For example see: Pauly, D. et al. 2002. *Towards Sustainability in World Fisheries*. Pages 689-695, Nature 418.

<sup>29</sup> See: <http://www.adn.com/article/20110813/pebble-advertising-wars-heat-sides-peek-support>

of many of these commercial fishermen, Yup'ik Eskimo peoples, lived for thousands of years from non-industrial technology dependent salmon fishing. It seems that at this point, to mount a truly effective fight against the mine and all that it symbolizes, these fishermen need renounce industrialism outright, including industrial fishing and move back towards fishing at the subsistence level and into a wildness centered future. However, because in the last 50 years these communities have become so heavily dependent upon commodification and the industrial goods it provides in trade, their ability to shift back to a localized subsistence orientation, both physically and psychological, may likely be gone.

Are any of the above so-called conscious activists merely pursuing the commodification pathway temporarily, as a bridge to a different future? This is a question that must be asked. But let's face it: specialization, the division of labor, and commodification ultimately brought us to this point (fossil energy and digital-tech are latecomers in the game) and without commodification there would be no industrialism as we know it today. So as commodification fails us, and fails the planet, we need to be much more critical about how we attempt to organize in the future. Unless a conscious effort is made to organize in alternative ways, we can only expect repetition of debilitating commodification feedback loops to occur in whatever new societies formulate from the ruins of this one.

## **In Eternal Defense of Wildness: An Anarcho-Primitivist Pledge of Resistance Against Commodification**

“They become ‘wealthier’ by enlarging the number of individuals they have reciprocal relationships with. It is a wonderfully sensible way for the individual to ensure there is always someone to look after his or her interests, and so might be seen as the primal key to unlocking our human potential”. Stephan Corry, former Survival International director, speaking about his observations of indigenous peoples gifting as opposed to hoarding.

I think the people who survive the coming bottleneck will organize in various ways. As the world-system implodes there is no doubt that some communities and entire cultures will remain embedded in trade oriented delayed return and thus remain continually at war with wildness. I think it will be very difficult for most to shed themselves of this mentality and it is not unrealistic to assume that there will always be large groups of Takers roaming about. There will inevitably be societies organized around classes of conquerors, elites, and peasants. Societies that decide to pursue large-scale sedentary agricultural production will likely attempt to organize under either of the two opposing models of socialism or capitalism. Regardless of which way these are organized, they will be based upon specialization, hierarchy, and trade surplus production and



therefore they will not be socially or ecologically resilient. As an anarchist, I say it is best to stay as far away from any of these arrangements as possible.

Richard Heinberg recently alluded to the potential for serfdom by maintaining division of labor in post-collapse agricultural production:

You know, high energy returns on energy investment is what made the Industrial Revolution happen. It is what made the middle class, it is what made urbanization and all the rest...if we go all the way back to the average energy profits of agrarian times, which were maybe three or four, five to one...virtually three-quarters of the population would have to be involved in producing energy in order to produce enough surplus for the other 25% to live in towns and specialize in being bankers or mayors...stamp collectors, who knows. But that is the path we are on<sup>30</sup>.

Is this a desirable path to be on? We need to take an honest look at where commodification takes us, how it distresses our relationships with one and other and our relationships with wildness. It is a dangerous oversight to brush off the importance of delayed return/immediate return analysis. No matter what type of strategy you plan to use to obtain the basic necessities of life; food, clothes, shelter, water, heat, it appears critical that specialization and trade oriented surplus production are done away with to the furthest extent possible.

With cognizance of the long-term effects of commodification on human societies, wildness, and the planet, the only way forward is for us to scale back and forge pathways that move towards total immediate dependence on local ecology, not as a commodity, but as our source of life and spirit. Anarcho-primitivists should stand against 'rewilding'/transitionary/local foods movements that perceive, promote, and utilize commodification as a solution to our crisis. When designing the future, when thinking about how we might try to build community, commodification oriented thinking needs to be heavily scrutinized and not just taken as inevitable, particularly when it comes to land projects and rewilding activities. Rather than obsessing about financial security (whatever that means) we should set as a priority efforts to redefine our relationships with one and other and with the natural world. Surely commodification will continue to occur in our surrounds but we should reject it, on principle. Through this we will become the truly adaptable and resilient, the fleet footed, silent, untraceable, independent, unconquerable ones: the last defenders of a wild earth.

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<sup>30</sup> <http://richardheinberg.com/museletter-262-the-oil-revolution-story-is-dead-wrong>

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<[blackandgreenreview.org/2015/06/bagr1-commodification-of-wildness-and.html](http://blackandgreenreview.org/2015/06/bagr1-commodification-of-wildness-and.html)>

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