

The Call of the Wild

Is biodiversity aided by a human attraction to place?

Mark Dowie

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CULTURES OF HABITAT

On Nature, Culture, and Story.

By Gary Paul Nabhan.

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Counterpoint. \$25.

From almost every scientific discipline has risen a voice that speaks to the laity in clear and coherent sentences — Stephen Jay Gould from paleontology, Carl Sagan from astronomy, Richard Feynman from physics, Lewis Thomas from medicine. And there is Gary Paul Nabhan, an ethnobiologist from southern Arizona, whose small but inspiring stories from the far outposts of humanity teach us about the tense and tenuous relationship between culture and biological diversity.

Nabhan begins “Cultures of Habitat” with a simple but brilliant conceit. He considers, side by side, two color-coded, county-by-county maps of the United States that a friend found in separate back issues of *The Atlantic Monthly*. One shows the relative duration of human residency within each county — the darker the county, the less stable the population. The other map, “The Geography of Endangerment,” counts endangered species — the darker the hue, the more species threatened. Nabhan overlaps the maps and is aghast to find a near-perfect color alignment. He deduces a direct relationship between human attachment to place and biodiversity, and by inference between human culture and ecological health. He defends his hypothesis with story:

“If I could distill what I have learned during a thousand and one nights working as a field biologist,” Nabhan writes, “it would be this: each plant or animal has a story of some unique way of living in this world. By tracking their stories down to their finest detail, our own lives may be informed and enriched.”

Wandering through the American Southwest with occasional side trips to Mexico, the Arctic and Australia, among other places, Nabhan hears and recounts the legends, songs, myths and dreams of ancient clans and tribes, whose ties to the land they have farmed and hunted for a hundred generations or more have produced a land ethic that the naturalist and conservationist Aldo Leopold discovered in a similar pursuit. “We need to hear the stories of these creatures revered by other cultures,” Nabhan writes, “from Inuit whale hunters in the Arctic Circle, to O’odham singers of sacred datura songs in the deserts, to Mayan beekeepers in the rain forests of the Yucatan peninsula.” By experiencing the sounds, smells and rituals of wildlife in their habitat over thousands of years, Nabhan believes, land-based people become hard-wired for language, song and dance through their connection to their natural environment: deer dancing becomes indigenous ballet, local bird songs can be heard in local music.

Nabhan finds the Seri’s and the Sand Papago’s passion to preserve wildness in stories of animals facing extinction, like coyote, bear and wren, told in languages that also face extinction — languages far better suited for transmitting ecological literacy than the cyberbabble of technological culture. As post-Columbian civilization pushes

or seduces indigenous people from wilderness habitats, the world is faced with what the scientist Robert Michael Pyle calls “the extinction of experience” and Nabhan laments as “the termination of direct, hands-on contact between children and wildlife.”

Nabhan is careful not to portray humans as natural stewards of land or wilderness, and acknowledges that some native peoples are better stewards than others. But he does believe that in the course of adapting to place, almost any human community will, given enough time, learn through observation about its relationship to the plant and animal life of its region. Eventually, place becomes treasured and as carefully guarded by defenders of the culture as gold was by post-Columbian settlers. He cites the Yaqui legend of warriors who come down from the Sierra Bacatete to the southern Sonoran desert to confront a band of Spanish slave traders. A Yaqui elder draws “a line on the ground,” a Spanish soldier wrote in his journal, “threatening death to any intruder who dared cross it” and enter the Bacatete mountains, whose highlands are sacred to the Yaqui.

Perhaps inadvertently, but probably deliberately, Nabhan injects himself into a controversy that today rages through his literary habitat, particularly northern New Mexico, where environmentalists and old Indo-Hispanic cultures are in cold war over the fate of “wild nature,” especially old-growth forests. At issue is the definition of wilderness. Nabhan questions the wisdom of setting land aside for everything but mankind; he believes that the right human population, one that is intimate with the life around it and knows its value, is generally better for wilderness. “Ultimately, the most potent way of conserving biological diversity,” he argues, “may be to protect the diversity of the cultures that have stewarded the plant and animal communities on which our agriculture is based.” He rebukes those who disagree: “It is ironic how many conservationists have presumed that biodiversity can survive where indigenous cultures have been displaced... Ironic because most biodiversity remaining on earth today occurs in areas where cultural diversity also persists.”

It’s a difficult point to prove. He really doesn’t try. Though a growing number of environmentalists agree with him, many wildlife biologists still argue that biodiversity in some ecosystems is best protected by keeping people out. The challenge for ethnobiologists and wilderness preservationists alike is to determine which wilderness is suitable for human habitation, then discover what culture is right for the habitat. A tough choice, but since some human existence in most natural habitats on the planet seems inevitable, it would seem essential to consider the relationship between culture and biology and to emphasize the value of agricultural diversity as a means of preserving biological diversity. This Nabhan does, and does it well.

Where he falls, and it’s into a trap he himself describes, is in harping too much about threatened species — a worthy obsession, but one that exacerbates public misunderstanding of the issues. Polls in fact show that low biodiversity is generally confused with species loss. But biodiversity, as Nabhan acknowledges, has very little to do with the number of species in an ecosystem. It should be understood instead, as he says, as “a complex of interactions,” cultural as well as biological. Heady stuff for a public

largely glazed over on the topic of diversity, it's true. But a more persistent pursuit of the theme would have made this an even more valuable book.

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