

Confessions of a Whistle-blower

Paul Shepard

To the extent that I have been an environmental activist, my career began unexpectedly. As all such turnings should be, it was associated with a special place. In 1948, between terms at the University of Missouri, I took a summer job as naturalist in the Missouri state park system and was assigned to Big Spring State Park, on the Current River near Van Buren. My father had camped there as a boy when the family, including his parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, came down from Kansas City on the night train of the Kansas City, Fort Scott and Memphis Railroad (later the St. Louis and San Francisco or “Frisco”). At Willow Springs they changed to a branch line, the Current River Railroad, and got off at “Shepard,” a point on a saw-mill spur about a mile from the spring.

Big Spring is a green river coming straight up from a “bottomless” blue hole at the foot of a limestone bluff. At a flow of 250 million gallons a day, it is one of the world's great springs. The spring branch runs three hundred yards through ferns, dogwood, and paw paws before reaching the Current, whose size it increases by a third.

Despite summer Ozark hazards such as poison ivy, mild malaria, the odd accident with knives and other tools, it was a halcyon time. I was given the use of a small stone building, with sleeping quarters at the rear. The front room I made into a “museum,” with a borrowed collection of Indian artifacts and a snake collection as centerpieces. A hundred yards away, at the spring branch edge, was a lodge where I ate in a rustic dining room and enjoyed the company of the proprietors and visitors. The whole park, with its lodge, cabins, boat rides, and refreshment stand, was run by the McKinney family. McKinney himself was a wily survivor of the political spoils system. His wife ran the lodge and their young adult children the concessions. They were husky, hearty, generous, and I liked them all.

One day in late July, off duty, I was hiking on the bluffs downstream. On a promontory above and in view of the spring area I came across pine stumps, freshly cut. From the little forestry I had studied at the University, I knew the state to have been heavily logged and that no true, old-growth tracts remained. Yet here had been a dozen trees whose stumps were three feet or so in diameter. What a calamity it seemed, for the park, for the state, for the white pine in the poor old Ozarks, which had been burned and skinned and wasted for most of a century.

I soon learned from park workers that what McKinney had done was neither unusual nor illegal. No use fuming against him, or even against the Department of Parks. So I wrote to Missouri's governor, Phil Donnelly. I told him I thought the administrative system was wrong and why I thought such big trees were valuable, far beyond their lumber. I brazenly lectured him as follows:

The appeal of the untouched forest to a "nature lover" is an esthetic, almost intuitional point of view. He instinctively believes that the forest is richer if it has all its predators and all of its "too old" trees. But if our sense of practicality prevents our seeing that viewpoint we might turn to science itself, to the study of ecology in which the relations of all things are considered, to that field not dedicated to the production of lumber or the growing of crops nor to any single phase of all the complex angles that affect the whole picture. It is known today by an increasing number of people that you cannot take a tree out of the woods and nothing else. With it you take whole communities and associations of life . . . It may be said that the cut trees are selected, that many of them are getting too old. It may be argued a number of ways that the forest is better off without them, or that the new growth has a chance without being crowded. But that is the lumbermen and foresters' point of view. Their conception of a forest has notoriously lacked a consciousness of the interrelation of those trees to all other forms of life . . . I suggest that we critically inspect our sense of values in regard to these forests, that henceforth nothing be cut and nothing killed in the park, that we allow the big trees to grow up and die and rot back to the earth . . . We have not yet reached the point where we can understand how land heals itself, when let alone. There is no forest on earth that can be planted as successfully as one untouched by man or commerce. There will be no forest worth my grandchildren's seeing unless we set it aside now.

A few days later McKinney was at my door, lathered, angry, and frustrated. He knew I hadn't accused him of wrongdoing. But after that the McKinneys went silent; I was a turncoat, a whistle-blower.

Governor Donnelly, in his lame duck months in office, did not reply, though I did get a letter from the Chief of Parks pointing out that my

letter should have gone through the usual channels and reminding me of my duty to create good public relations. I went back to school in the fall and the matter quickly went out of my reach, but a crusading newspaper, the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, quoted my four page letter to the governor and pursued the issue. Two years later, in 1950, I had a letter from the next governor, Forrest Smith, saying that the Chief of Parks had written a report stating that the newspaper articles were “mostly untrue, greatly magnified and do not accurately state the facts.” Then Donnelly reclaimed the governorship in 1952, revamped the State Park Board on a non-political basis and replaced most of the park superintendents in the state.

Big Spring remains a natural gem. In the early 1990s it was absorbed in the National Scenic Riverways system and placed under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. In 1995 the Shepards gathered there to celebrate the centenary of the family campout as described in the letters of my great grandfather, John. During this outing, grandfather Pierce shot a rattlesnake with his pistol almost at my grandmother's feet, perhaps justifying her requisition, out of “shock,” of a bed of boughs laboriously put together by my eight-year old father. That summer the local landowner offered to sell the spring and its environs to John Shepard for a little over a hundred dollars, but it was more than he could afford. The only living witnesses to the Shepard campout of 1897 might have been those pine trees on the bluff, which my grandchildren will not see. A badly faded photograph shows the family at the spring: John in a chair, the others standing or sitting, nine in all, three generations. As for a place with which we can identify, most of us have poor roots at best. I think John would have been proud of my effort in 1948 to put a small stamp of guardianship on a few square feet of public property.

My second and final experience as a whistle blower occurred in the fall of 1956, after working as a summer naturalist for the National Park Service at Olympic National Park. Arriving in the park from Illinois with my family, we settled into a lovely old cabin on the east end of Lake Crescent where Harold Ickes had stayed in 1938 when he and Franklin Roosevelt wrenched the center of the Olympic peninsula from the US Department of Agriculture to save some of the fabulous coastal rain forest from becoming plywood. The house was a large log structure, one of the first in the area, its big fireplace and mellow interior redolent of years of loving use by “nature lovers” like ourselves. The only disturbance was the rumble of enormous trucks past the house, bound for Port Angeles with great logs, some of them twenty feet in diameter.

I was reminded of these logs during the orientation program for the seasonal employees—rangers, naturalists, trail crews, fire guards, and others. The two-day session was made up of talks by the heads of various divisions within the park. Chief among them was the park forester, who spoke at length on the management of the park's trees, ending with a tally of the millions of board feet sold from the park annually. It must have seemed to the young men doing their first stint in the park that without this man's unrelenting “service” the forest would soon all be rotten and infected. Then the chief naturalist was granted a few moments for his say. He started to talk about the interpretive branch of the park service, and was cut short by the ranger running the meeting. Nothing was said in the two days about the history and philosophy of the preservation of nature.

The introductory meeting did not fully prepare me for the spectacle of a national park that seemed everywhere to be undergoing “improvement” of the worst kind. Some of the big trucks lumbering along the Park's only through road were carrying logs cut in the park. These trucks belonged to the big logging companies of the west coast, notably Rayonier, which had pushed politically since Ickes' day to reduce or abolish the park. They were clear-cutting on national forest and private lands, often misjudging the park boundary to their own advantage. The park forester was marking trees for cutting along the park roads, creating a right-of-way from thirty to sixty feet back from the roadside. Trees were being cut near campgrounds where they were said to be “dangerous to people.” If a campground was at the base of a slope this included all the trees above it. The park photographer and even the park naturalist were sent to survey the interior by air, to map trees levelled by avalanche during the winter. Crews floated these trees down the Dosiwalops, Elwah, and other rivers to road points where they could be hauled to the mill.

None of this cutting and hauling was done by park personnel but by contractors from the mills. Everywhere their disregard for the fragility of the wet forests and meadows was evident, and scars remained from the big machines in earlier years. The biggest operation of all was the use of bulldozers and other large vehicles in the channels of the Hoh, Bogashiel, and Queets Rivers in an immense salvage program. This was done by driving heavy machines up the riverbeds in the fall and winter to drag out the trees, felled by snowslides, and lodged in the streams. As a result, these rivers had become highways rather than protected habitats. Elsewhere the park forester found “incipient” outbreaks of tree diseases, usually in the more accessible river valleys, requiring that

acres of Douglas fir, Western red cedar, and western hemlock, many trees more than two hundred feet tall, being “subject to an epidemic” or to “attack by beetles” be cleared to protect the forest. These reasons for cutting were stated in the logging contracts.

Karsten Lien, a fellow “seasonal,” led a secret group, including some of the permanent personnel of the park, in gathering evidence that the park superintendent was out of control in permitting logging in the Park, although he was doing nothing illegal. As Lien says in his book, *Olympic Battleground*, my role was to be the “fall guy,” to do the actual whistle-blowing by contacting the Natural Resources Council and the state garden club presidents. I telegraphed those organizations urging them to contact Conrad Wirth, director of the National Park Service in Washington, DC, following this with a long letter describing the logging. I did not find out until then that the same issue had arisen eight years earlier with the same park superintendent. The matter had been kept quiet by the service and Washington had assumed that all was well. Consequently, the main office was caught unprepared, which compounded their embarrassment.

Resuming my previous temerity, I wrote directly to Wirth in the same presumptuous mood that I had written the governor of Missouri eight years earlier:

Here is an opportunity in a natural area to study the ramifying effects of a blowdown and to determine the roles of other animals and plants in the population dynamics of the beetles. A team of naturalists studying this whole community might learn much that would aid tree-farmers in areas outside the parks, besides providing in itself a valuable advance in our understanding of the forest as a whole . . . The outcome might vindicate our position that most impending epidemics should go uncontrolled or it might convince us that we stand to lose too much and that salvage is necessary. In either case the parks and Park Service will gain in the long run.

All salvage operations were halted. I heard from Senator Neuberger's assistant that he was considering an investigation. In haste the NPS set up public hearings in Seattle, perhaps to act before Congress did. Official tours of the area were made by Interior brass, congressmen, NPS people, and interested conservation and outdoor groups in the Northwest. Wirth issued a statement that I was in error, misunderstood where park boundaries were, that beetle control and dead tree removal had always been park policy. I had been misled, he said, about the salvage from the interior. The bridges built to hold twenty times the weight of an automobile were merely a “safety factor.” Even so, the

NPS proceeded to publish a new policy statement requiring park superintendents to clear all salvage contracts with the head office. The Olympic superintendent was transferred elsewhere and the chief forester went back to happier work with one of the big logging companies.

I loved the parks and had worked summers in Crater Lake and Glacier before Olympic. I knew when we went public with our information from the Olympic that the door was closed on my employment by the Park Service forever. Even so, I tested the matter the following summer by applying for work in a different park and was rewarded by a letter from the regional director that I had not lived up to their standards of loyalty. But my efforts were merely a gesture. I had learned that the government agencies could not be expected to lead in exploring the philosophy of wilderness or in creative thinking about using wild land consistent with its special qualities.

My Ph.D. thesis, *American Attitudes Towards the Landscape in New England and the West*, included an historical study of the early national parks in which I had concluded that they were a unique American institution but nonetheless part of a long history of landscape pictorial arts and poetry, and were only in a physical sense a new adventure in the human reintegration with the natural world. I endlessly rewrote this thesis, and it was published by Knopf in 1967 as *Man in the Landscape*. I was proud of this book, which had taken fifteen years of struggle, and still believe its conclusions to be true, but I had long since decided that History would never provide an adequate basis for thinking about and framing value in the context of what William Van Deventer, a professor-friend in Columbia, Missouri, called “human ecology.” He taught me that History would forever regard the appropriate relationship of humans to nature to be “The Man-Centered Community of Domestication.” Thereafter, as an antidote, as a member of the biology departments of Knox and Smith Colleges from 1954 to 1970, I submerged myself in the study and teaching of human evolution, as I searched for an alternative to what I felt to be History’s ecological shortcomings and lack of deep time perspective.

Even so, I also continued to give a course on the landscape in human experience, incorporating a wide variety of articles from different fields. One day I suggested to a book salesman from Houghton-Mifflin that he show my pile of readings to an editor. In due course they appeared as an anthology, *The Subversive Science*, The title came from Paul Sears' description of ecology. That was 1969, so the collection was available when the wave of environmentalism swept the country in the

early 1970's, but for me *The Subversive Science* and its successor, *Environ/Mental*, (Daniel McKinley, who was co-author of both volumes, helped edit, advised on illustrations, and provided bibliographies, and preface) were side issues, demonstrations that the "environmental problem" was distributed throughout the fields of human thought, and so would be its "solution."

By chance, this was a crucial time in the science of palaeontology of pre-humans, in field studies of higher primates, and in the ethnography of living hunting-gathering peoples. The moment seemed ripe for a synthesis by an outsider like myself. In it I would include a critique of history and civilization as the catastrophic consequence of shifting human ecology and economy from a wild to a domesticated basis. The result was *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*, published by Scribner's in 1973. I argued there that humans could only be understood as apes, that hunting had set humans apart from other primates, that agriculture was the true "Fall," and that some kind of recovery of our Paleolithic selves was essential to understanding the predicament of our species and our environment. Further, experts had long debated the source of human intelligence and it occurred to me that the answer to the puzzle of the large human brain was right under our noses: the increase in our brain size was the result of hunting large game and escaping from and competing with other predators, not only as a way of life but as a mythic and ritual translation of the complex natural history of plants, animals, volcanoes, storms, and the rest of the realm that most organisms, as the vernacular goes, take for granted. Of course, the idea that we are essentially Paleolithic was not entirely original, but in setting it against agriculture I felt I could pursue this claim to its logical conclusion and shed new light on modern life and the plight of the modern individual.

Chief among the phenomena of the Paleolithic life of our ancestors were the other most intelligent animals, so that I was ready to explore the making of the human mind as the venerable outcome of the assiduous observation of, the intense interaction with, and ultimately the symbolization of wild animals. I was ready to argue that wild animals were the first, original symbols not only in the past but in the life of every person, then and now. These conjectures, which I still believe to be true, was published by Viking in 1978 as *Thinking Animals, Animals and the Development of Human Intelligence*.

Inasmuch as a healthy human psyche depended on participation in the archaic life-way I had described, what were the consequences of its collapse and absence? Turning for help to the conventional psychology

of the 1970s, I was dismayed to find no attempt whatever to connect psychopathology with the human/non-human encounter. By contrast, psychiatry was brimming with insights and implications, although the psychiatrists themselves did not seem particularly attuned to it. One notable exception was Harold Searles, whose book, *The Nonhuman Environment*, was a revelation and whose personal encouragement I treasured. For fifteen years I had been offering a course on the nature/human encounter in western history. Using my notes on the psychopathology of the infant and child, I now thought I could see the tracks of dementia in our civilized past generated by the distortions of nature in the child's experience. Virtually all psychopathology begins with the infant or child, so that the first twelve years of life became my focus in the search for the ecological sources of insanity that might illuminate our destruction of life on the planet and blindness to the monster of overpopulation. I attempted to describe a normal childhood in terms of small-group human life centered on a wild rather than a domesticated environment, and then to illustrate the impairments to such a model of childhood in several historical eras. Ultimately I found myself examining the myth of history itself. Sierra Club Books published this reconstruction of our past as episodes of deprivation as *Nature and Madness* in 1982.

If there is a pattern to my books over the years perhaps it could be characterized as a swing from culture to nature and then back again. Modern society tends to understand itself as caught in a conflict between the two. After doing History in my own "natural" terms I went for Nature as a "cultural" phenomenon in an attempt to escape that endless duality. This attempt at synthesis resulted in *The Sacred Paw, The Bear in Nature, Myth and Literature*, to which Barry Sanders contributed a chapter on the bear in literature and Gary Snyder generously allowed me to reprint "The Fear of Bears" as an afterword.

I think that we have never understood what the real environmental problem is and therefore our solutions need complete reframing in the light of better questions. Unfortunately for the prospect of change in highly centralized, modern societies, it is so difficult to become a successful politician that they are engaged in a lifelong struggle to augment and consolidate power, leaving most of them ignorant of biological evolution and ecologically illiterate. The rift in the vision of who we are as a species is widening toward the end of the century, so that a broader, more organic notion of the human circumstance seems almost inaccessible to those with a growth and development mentality. What came to be called in the nineties "essentialism"—the belief that the givenness of things is their most important aspect and that we are a

natural species in an intrinsically limited but complex biosphere— seems to me to sum up the understanding upon which any environmental solutions depend. The targets of my whistle-blowing seemed to me not merely stupid or greedy, but bit players in an immense tragedy, so it may not be surprising that, instead of the gritty conflict of activist politics, I have chosen, through learning and teaching, to try to rethink the way we perceive our world.

Afterword

This brief personal history was written in 1995 when Paul was in partial remission of lung cancer and after attending a reunion with family members at Big Spring State Park in Missouri. Before he died on July 16, 1996, he had published two more books, *The Others* and *The Only World We've Got*. He had also completed an anthology of his publications, *Traces of an Omnivore*, which was in press. Upon his death, he left drafts of a book, *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, and another anthology of his essays, *Encounters with Nature* for which he had contracts. I edited and published these after his death. Finally, I compiled his early essays on landscape and published them in an anthology called *Where We Belong*.

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