



Saving a Sense of Place: Birds, Almond Trees and the Ecology of Compassion

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Abstract: In this essay, the author explores the dimensions and impacts of acts of compassion, framed in his personal experience establishing a small nature reserve and wildlife rescue center in Costa Rica. His inspiration springs from becoming acquainted with a small group of people determined to save the spectacular great green macaw and its forest habitat from disappearing from the northern zone of the country. Expanding multinational agriculture has leveled vast expanses of the bird's lowland rainforest habitat, threatening not only the region's ecosystem, but also its identity and sense of place. Becoming involved in this struggle leads the author to the realization that saving the planetary ecosystem—and us—is at the crossroads of morality and priorities of survival. Only in setting aside self-interest and fostering consideration of other beings—human and non-human—can ecological and social catastrophe be averted; a perspective articulated as the *ecology of compassion*. In rejecting the cynical outlook that individuals do not matter in the face of global environmental issues, this essay examines how a small undertaking, itself inspired by the deeds and writings of others, has set in motion beneficial events that reach far beyond the boundaries of a small property.

Resumen: En este ensayo, el autor explora las dimensiones y los impactos de actos de compasión enmarcados dentro de su experiencia personal, al establecer una pequeña reserva natural y centro de recuperación de la vida salvaje en Costa Rica. Su inspiración surge cuando es contactado por un grupo de gente de la comunidad que está determinada a salvar a la espectacular lapa verde y su natural habitat de desaparecer de la zona norte del país. Ellos le muestran que la agricultura expansiva multinacional ha destruido los habitats naturales en las tierras bajas del bosque de estos pájaros, amenazando no solo el ecosistema de la región sino también su identidad y sentido de pertenencia del lugar. Al involucrarse en esta batalla, el autor toma conciencia de que salvar el ecosistema del planeta y a nosotros es una encrucijada entre la moralidad y la sobre vivencia. Solamente poniendo a un lado los intereses personales y promoviendo la consideración hacia los otros seres –humanos y no humanos- puede evitarse una

catástrofe ecológica y social, una perspectiva que es articulada como la *ecología de la compasión*. Al rechazar el pensamiento cínico de que a los individuos no les importan los asuntos ambientales globales, este ensayo examina como un pequeño compromiso personal inspirado por las acciones de otros puede motivar acciones beneficiosas que van mucho más allá de los límites de una pequeña propiedad.

The deeply furrowed trunk of the *almendro* tree seemed to extend forever, disappearing above and below into early morning mist. Suspended from a rope, a man paused for breath and to wipe stinging sweat from his eyes. The Intermittent muffled squawks coming out of the mist far above reassured him that he was ascending the right tree. As he resumed inching up the rope with his climbing gear, the irritation of vines and aerial roots dragging over his bare arms grew worse, but it was an encouraging sign--it meant that he was near the base of the tree's enormous crown, and his objective. Massive contorted dark limbs condensed out of the dull light above and vanished again as they writhed out into the fog. Reaching the nearest branch, he carefully inspected it for ants and snakes before hauling himself up onto its thick base. The squawking could be plainly heard now, just above him where a branch had been torn away from the trunk, perhaps a century or more ago by wind or lightning, leaving a deep cavity. With his goal so close, the man shook off his fatigue and scrambled the last few meters to the *lapa verde's* nest. To his relief, the large parents were off foraging in nearby trees. He pulled himself up to the edge of the cavity, switched on his headlamp and peered in. Far down at the floor of the cavity two large, stubby chicks with oversized heads and beaks were blinking and squawking in alarm. They shrunk away from the light suddenly spilling into their small world, wobbling to one side of the cavity and huddling together. Wasting no time, the man thrust his arm deep into the nest. The cavity was so deep that his arm barely reached the bottom. He groped until his hand closed around the squirming body of one of the chicks. It flailed feebly at his hand with its stubby featherless wings as it was dragged out of the cavity and thrust into a cloth bag. The man

quickly tied the bag shut and hung it from his belt. The remaining chick's plaintive calls faded as the man rappelled rapidly down the tree with his prize. Someone in town was going to pay good money for this great green macaw chick.

If it survives the trauma of capture, does not succumb to dehydration, malnutrition or disease from being kept in a cramped, excrement filled shipping container, it may live for decades as a living ornament in someone's home. With none of its kind to develop social bonds with, it will turn its vital need for connection into attachment to its human owner. It might well outlive its owner, or simply become too much trouble to keep and be handed off or sold to another owner, perhaps many others. It will never know the dynamic union of a flock searching a rainforest canopy for fruiting *almendro* trees, or form a life-long bond with a mate, and never produce a new generation of a dwindling species. Perhaps one day it will recognize the distant calls of a flock in a mix of street noise filtering through a window, or spot a mated pair soaring high overhead as it sits, flight feathers cut away, on a garden perch.

One could logically argue that in the face of unfolding environmental catastrophe--be it global climate upset or the consuming crush of too many humans on the planet--saving individual animals is sentimental folly. Even if a species' numbers are so perilously low that saving an individual makes a significant difference, why bother if its habitat is destined to become an agricultural landscape, shopping mall or housing development? Whatever the scale of the preservation vs. consumption debate, at its core is a value conflict between coldly logical cost-benefit equations of gain, and the emotional-spiritual yearning to sustain a connection with Nature. Is it the birthright of our species to consume, crescendo and die off like bacteria in a lab

culture dish, or is it our responsibility to pass a livable and soul-enriching world on to future generations? Between these opposed poles of thought dwell the countless variants of belief each of us harbors, and is the place where the fate of our world is being played out. Do we strive to save other species and their habitats because of potential or known economic value, or because human health and survival hinges on the health of our planet, or because it's *right*? The answer to this many-layered question is "yes". Greening the machine of capitalism has already blurred the old perceived separation between "progress" and "preservation", and offers hope of productivity and employment to fading economies. From a Malthusian perspective, hard evidence of the threats already at our doorstep--natural disasters, decaying living standards and resource conflicts--are changing attitudes and policies decades of scientific warnings could not. But environmental stewardship is also a unifying and leveling moral issue. Harm to the environment contributes directly or indirectly to the growing chasm between the few rich and the many poor. In re-defining prosperity and questioning concepts of entitlement, wealthy nations finally face the real costs and consequences of unsustainable economic growth. Ignoring the continuum from the individual to the universe runs the risk of losing sight of underlying moral issues, and ultimately eviscerates the goal of bringing about positive change. Ultimately something must be re-learned and embraced, a concept fundamental to indigenous cultures for millennia: Reverence of plants, animals, air, water and landscapes is reverence of *us*.

To Alex Martinez, the connection between the individual animal, its habitat and the larger world is obvious and at the heart of a passionate determination to defend wildlife and habitats. It has shaped and driven his life from childhood, cost him dearly physically and financially and exposed him to intimidation and violence. He has lived most of his adult life near the town

Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí, on the northeastern Caribbean slope of Costa Rica. The area, while still heavily forested in many places, saw some of the most rapid deforestation to occur in the country during the 1980s, largely at the hands of expanding banana and pineapple agriculture. The lowland rainforest that once covered the entire Rio Sarapiquí drainage basin was among the most species-rich to be found anywhere: Five hundred and fifteen bird species, 139 mammals, 135 reptiles, 80 amphibians, 1,200 butterflies (and a continuously growing list of other insects), and 6000 vascular plants (including 420 orchids). For Alex, it was the bewildering variety of birds that spoke to his soul. Over the years the skill he developed at identifying birds--visually and by their calls--and knowing where to find them made him widely sought as a naturalist guide.

Expanded agriculture along with a growing tourism and service economy brought rapid population growth to the area. A network of new roads, reaching deep into disappearing forests facilitated wildlife poaching for meat and the exotic animal trade. Illegal logging and over fishing of rivers--using dynamite or poison--became common and perpetrators were rarely prosecuted. With virtually no official enforcement available to stop the plunder, it would come down to local residents to organize an effort to stop it. Macaws and parrots were in high demand in the exotic animal trade, especially in Europe, North America and Asia. Before captive breeding programs reduced demand for wild-caught birds, a macaw or large parrot could fetch in excess of \$10,000 on the black market. One of the most spectacular and most endangered birds to be found in Central America is the great green macaw, or *lapa verde*. Like its close relative, the scarlet macaw, it is large (up to 90 cm long), wildly colorful, extremely intelligent and gregarious. Beyond its appeal to humans--an unforgettable encounter for a bird watcher, a

lucrative black market opportunity or a tasty source of protein--the macaw represents something far more important. Ecologists refer to species whose presence in an ecosystem indicates overall health of the system as “keystone species”. For macaws to feed and successfully reproduce, they require wild almond trees--known locally as *almendros*--to feed and nest in. The *almenbro* needs birds like macaws to help distribute its seeds. Individual *almendros* and other tree species are usually widely separated in rainforests, so a large area of forest is needed to provide enough trees to sustain a population of macaws. Large areas of forest mean low densities of humans and human disturbance of the landscape. So if the macaw thrives, its ecosystem is in good shape.

To a few brave Sarapiquí locals, some of them reformed poachers, such designations were not important. Unlike the ecologist’s rationale, with its inherent process of ongoing refinement and debate, something more simple and powerful motivated them. Greed was destroying an important element of their sense of place. On some level, the living energy of the place was as vital to them as *almendros* were to macaws and the Rio Sarapiquí was to its fish. The “whys” might be aesthetic, emotional, spiritual or totally practical, but a common element connected them: Respect for what is and a desire to have it persist for the benefit of others, human and non-human. In 1985, they organized to become the Sarapiquí Chapter of the Asociación Preservacionista de Flora y Fauna Silvestre (APREFLOFAS), an environmental advocacy group based in Moravia, San José. The Sarapiquí canton’s problems were daunting, but by no means unique; poaching and tree cutting were out of control in many parts of the country. With only five wildlife inspectors on its payroll, the government acknowledged the magnitude of the problem and extended arrest and confiscation powers to volunteer wardens. Strengthened by legal authority, the activities of the group soon began to have a positive impact on the area’s beleaguered wildlife. This was due partly to a favorable prosecution record in the local courts,

but also because of the group's growing reputation for being tough and persistent. It was common for them to patrol long miles of riverbanks or forest on foot in pitch darkness, often confronting armed poachers with little more than flashlights and machetes. In Puerto Viejo, intimidation and retribution from embittered convicted violators was common, and threats and violence occasionally spilled over onto their families. A far less dangerous aspect of their work involved outreach activities at area schools and public events. Sometimes accompanied by a confiscated bird or monkey, the volunteers brought cheerful pandemonium to classrooms as they delivered their passionate message on behalf of Nature. With eager hands in the air, a new generation that might, and must, see things in a new way would relish the break in the school day routine.

Much of the wildlife that was confiscated was released close to where it had been taken. In at least one instance, this led to re-establishing a population of birds that had disappeared from the area. Animals that were injured, sick or too tame to be released usually ended up sharing space with guests at Alex Martinez's bed and breakfast lodge at the edge of Puerto Viejo. The basic needs of the animals were met, but space for large cages and the time to properly rehabilitate the animals was in short supply. In spite of this handicap, a number of birds--including a scarlet macaw blind in one eye after an encounter with a rock-throwing human--have returned to the wild directly from Alex's property. When he obtained the land in the late 1980s, it was a strip of abandoned pasture. He planted the lot with tree seeds collected from nearby forests, emphasizing species that were important feeding resources for birds. A few years later, he had created a small verdant oasis in the midst of pastures and a sprawling strip of housing that threatened to connect Puerto Viejo and neighboring La Guaria in an unbroken stretch of tin roofs. Birds, sloths, monkeys and a host of other creatures were soon using the small, reforested

lot as a corridor between forested hills behind Alex's property and land on the other side of a highway protected by the Organization for Tropical Studies (OTS) La Selva field station.

In the early 1990s, the group joined with other environmental organizations in an initiative to create a corridor of protected forest connecting the Indio-Maíz Biosphere Reserve in southern Nicaragua and the La Selva Biological Reserve near Puerto Viejo. Known as the Corredor Biológica San Juan-La Selva, it would close a gap in a largely intact swath of habitat from Nicaragua to Costa Rica's Cordillera Central mountain range. From there, existing national parks protect large areas of forest all the way to Panama's bordering national park lands. Key sections in northern Costa Rica remain in private ownership and are at risk of settlement, conversion for agriculture and mining.

By 2000, green macaw population estimates were frighteningly low--as few as 50 nesting pairs remained in Costa Rica; numbers that meant every bird and nesting tree was critical to the species' continued survival in the country. Much of the bird's remaining lowland rainforest habitat north and east of Puerto Viejo had disappeared in a massive expansion of banana agriculture that began in 1985. Then-president Luís Alberto Monge signed into law what was known as the Banana Expansion Decree. Prior to this, three large transnational companies--Dole, Chiquita and Del Monte--had monopolized banana production. With the Decree, several more transnational and national banana producers were allowed into the market, creating a huge demand for additional production acreage. Banana production was doubled in less than seven years.¹ By 1996, the area of lowland rainforest destroyed for banana plantations had more than doubled as well, from 20,000 to 52,000 hectares. Costa Rica thus earned the dubious distinction of having the most extensive deforestation in Central America--a reduction in forest cover from 99.8% at the onset of colonization to 26% by the late 1990s.² A logging moratorium was

eventually imposed, but the moratorium did not take effect until after the banana producers had secured their enormous land concessions for conversion to plantations. As their habitat evaporated into banana monocultures, great green macaws also continued to suffer occasional losses to poaching. As recently as 2005, a Puerto Viejo businessman presented a government official touring Sarapiquí with the souvenir gift of a nestling great green macaw. The situation was remedied when Alex had a chance meeting with the man's political rival and explained what had happened. An embarrassing violation of wildlife laws by an elected official was ultimately, and gleefully, exposed.

In 2004, in a collaboration of a large number of environmental groups, educational institutions, research organizations and concerned individuals, Puerto Viejo hosted the third annual Bi-National Great Green Macaw Festival. The festival, conceived and organized by Centro Científico Tropical (CCT) of Costa Rica and Fundación del Río of Nicaragua, promotes the corridor initiative by bringing together people from both sides of the countries' shared border--the politically contentious Rio San Juan. By instilling concern and pride for the endangered macaws in residents on both sides of the river, the birds became an ideal symbol and rallying point for bi-national cooperation: They are spectacular and appealing animals, recognize no borders and require protection and abundant habitat on both sides of the San Juan to survive. Festivals include music, poetry, games and contests for children and innovative programs to educate people about threats to the natural heritage of the region.

A key element in the effort to bring great green macaws back from the brink of extinction is protection of nesting trees. Macaw pairs mate for life and use the same nesting cavity for decades if the tree is left undisturbed. During the period much of the land in the Sarapiquí region was cleared, *almendro* wood was too hard to cut with conventional logging technology. Hence,

almendros are often seen towering over otherwise open pastures. Unless disturbed by poachers, macaws continued to use the trees even though the surrounding forest was gone. In recent years, chainsaws have become powerful enough to actually cut the trees down and they have become valuable for their ultra-hard wood, which can be used for construction of durable decks or even pickup truck beds. With the threat of a growing demand for the wood, ongoing efforts to locate and monitor potential nesting trees took on new urgency. In 2004, the activists made an important first step in directly protecting an *almendro* that was being used by a nesting pair of macaws. The landowner involved accepted a donation of 250,000 colones (about U.S. \$500) for signing an agreement to protect the tree--a tiny fraction of what could be earned by selling it for lumber. An engraved steel plate was affixed to the tree, commemorating the event and the parties involved in donating the funds. The idea of saving nesting trees by "adopting" them caught on with tourists, many of whom were bird enthusiasts. Local businesses, ecotourism lodges and schools joined the effort as well. One landowner was so inspired by the outpouring of concern for macaws that he replanted the pasture surrounding his "adopted" nesting tree with native trees. (As of this writing in April 2009, 12 nesting trees have been placed under protection agreements, several more are awaiting final approval, and all remain safe.)

How does someone who grew up quite insulated from the world in the northern Midwest of the United States ultimately become swallowed up in involvement in Costa Rica? In my case, it started with being a spectator to a growing ecological crisis. The trends that would produce the sobering statistics of agricultural expansion in Costa Rica were well at work in tropical forests worldwide by the early 1980s. The problem grew rapidly in my awareness thanks to public television and other environmental media of the time, when deforestation was afforded the kind of media urgency now granted to global climate change. The scientific community knew

deforestation and climate change were intimately causally connected for decades, but media attention and public awareness--especially in the U.S.--are more fickle processes. When the world suddenly awoke to the plight of tropical forests, Costa Rica sat squarely in the spotlight; the most hopeful and most discouraging environmental news seemed to be coming from there. I began absorbing everything I could find on the subject.

But beyond global environmental issues, Costa Rica also seemed to me to be the kind of enchanting place that inspired naturalist *and* poet. Reading the exploits of field biologists who knew the land in more innocent times reinforced this notion in me--great stories had to be there for the recounting, in the uncompromising exuberance of the landscape. This is a place of restless volcanic mountains with rugged contours muted under a green quilt of trees pushing twenty stories skyward. Clinging stubbornly to steep ground, these same roots have been holding soil back from gnawing rains and earthquakes since before Columbus sailed. Here, shrouded in mist and perpetual half-light, murderous whitewater torrents are born as the Trade Winds dump their cargo of stolen ocean as rain measured in feet. During its seaward return, the water's character is at the whim of the face of the land. It sails out over fern-draped cliffs in twisting white curtains, boils over smooth boulders and meanders through jungle swamps as a seemingly motionless sky-mirror. At journey's end, it emerges from palm and coconut shade onto bright coastal beaches, cutting a final dash to the sea through white, gray or black sand. In this cycle, water conspires with a tropical sun to drive life at a fever pitch, fueling diversity expressed in a riot of colors, sounds and species. The land in turn grudgingly supports people—Hispanic, African, Native American and blended ethnic groups, unique in dialect and slang, music and passion, food and drink. But all sharing a humor and grace forged by cruel histories--a resilient passion to engage the hardships and undiluted joys of daily existence.

Drawn by this imagery and a deep sense of urgency, I visited Costa Rica for the first time in 1989. Besides wanting to experience tropical forests for myself (I refused to subscribe to the motive of “seeing them before they vanished”, that some travel promoters were sinking to suggest), I was curious to see how the country managed to do what the U.S. could not--get by without a military and set aside over 25% of its land in national parks. During a stay at an eco-lodge in Chilamate de Sarapiquí, my fate of involvement in Costa Rica would be sealed with a chance meeting of Alex Martinez. Alex was presenting an after dinner program for lodge guests on bird ecology and local conservation issues. After the program, we struck up a conversation, which led to many others during my stay. I was deeply intrigued by how the volunteer wildlife wardens managed to stay enthusiastic in the face of little monetary support, corrupt law enforcement and politicians, ruthless agribusiness power brokers and heartless, reprisal-prone poachers. Their rationale was based on the premise that there really was no choice; it simply *had* to be done. And sometimes, they won. A local politician got caught illegally hunting, a particularly notorious animal dealer was put out of business, a light came on in the eyes of a third grader listening to a conservation presentation, a bird, sloth, iguana or monkey was set free. I was so captivated by their story that I arranged to return six months later to produce a free-lance photojournalism project about them. The story, entitled *The Forest Guards of Sarapiquí*, appeared in *Exclusively Yours* magazine in 1991. Life’s many turns dictated that I would not return to Costa Rica until November of 2003. By the end of the visit, I was fully enmeshed in a scheme to develop a low-impact ecotourism business to complement Alex’s successful lodging and guiding services. Over the next several years we worked together organizing tours in the U.S. and Europe, some of which I traveled to Costa Rica to help lead. During my many visits, the dream of owning property for rehabilitating and releasing confiscated wildlife took hold of

us. Four years later, our hopes and plans finally became possibilities, at the end of an unlikely and doubtful day.

It was growing dark and a persistent light rain had finally completely soaked us. Cowering beside a tall tree in the middle of a pasture under the mildly annoyed gaze of some cattle, my daughter and I had vainly hoped that the branches far above would afford some protection. Over an hour earlier we had been dropped here while Alex visited a landowner who might be interested in selling his property. We were told to wait here and watch for *lapas*, thereby keeping my enthusiastic gringo presence from complicating a potential deal. It was his property that I now squinted hopefully at through the rain. On the other side of a narrow gravel road where the pasture ended, the land abruptly rose into a beautiful, tree-cloaked ridge. Even in the gray, fading light it seemed to radiate a welcoming sanctuary-like ambiance. I had yet to set foot on it, but it already seemed perfect. This was the fifth property we had investigated in a week. All of our previous efforts had unraveled into frustration. Now, with our flight home leaving early the next morning, we seemed to have run out of time. By the time I could next visit, rapidly increasing prices might put suitable property out of reach.

Alex's truck finally appeared in the distance and he jumped out, whistling for us to come in from the pasture. The cattle also obeyed, breaking their stares and heading off in the hopes that the source of the whistle might translate into a bucket of grain. When we arrived, Alex introduced us to the landowner, a slender man in his 70s named don Rafael. My daughter and I began to dare to be excited. We walked a short distance to the end of the gravel road where a small opening in the trees delineated the east boundary of the property. As don Rafael led us up a forested path that followed the edge of the property, I fumbled with my camera and slipped in the wet red clay. The old man moved up the slick, steep incline dodging vines and tree buttresses

like a gray jungle cat, pausing briefly to point out different features of the property and chat with Alex. Although we moved rapidly because of the rain, I did manage to capture a few images. One in particular somehow solidified my decision to buy the property on the spot. It caught my thoroughly drenched daughter gazing into the muted green glow of the forest around her, a look of happy amazement radiating from her face. In that instant, I knew this was where I needed be, and that sharing this experience with her made me feel like the best father I could ever hope to be.

I peered contentedly from the window of our plane as patches of rapidly receding countryside peeked through billowing clouds. Just south of the confluence of the Rio Sarapiquí and Rio Sucio, I caught a glimpse of the metallic sparkle of Puerto Viejo's roofs. To the southwest, the hills that cradled what I hoped to be my parcel of land rose like the folds of a bunched emerald carpet. A superstitious twinge in the back of my mind found this moment to be a good omen--happening to fly directly over the place where we had been scrambling on slippery clay and dodging dripping palm leaves less than 24 hours earlier. The excitement of that afternoon had cooled to a calm optimism that I was substantially closer to manifesting a dream. Don Rafael was enthused about selling the property. He and his wife had spent the last decade there scraping out an existence growing and selling *pejibaje*, or peach palm fruit. They lived in a house with gaps in the walls large enough to pass a hand through. Electricity was available, but the water supply was limited to what could be pumped or carried up from a nearby creek that could stop flowing in the dry season. The road connecting the property to the paved road into Puerto Viejo was rough everywhere, steep in many places and treacherous when wet. They had a chance to start over closer to the conveniences of a town, and don Rafael believed that we had appeared at just the right time.

Four months later I was standing on what was now my property, staring in disbelief at many stacks of perfectly sawn lumber. Two enormous *Pentaclethra* trees--known locally as *gavial*--had toppled in a storm the previous summer. Alex and I had seen the huge trunks lying on the ground during our earlier explorations of the property and wondered whether the wood might still be salvageable for a volunteer cabin. Thanks to the extreme density of the *gavilán* wood, the vast majority proved to be in perfect condition. Months of rain, fungus and colonizing insects had only penetrated the bark and smaller limbs. Using chalk lines and chainsaws, Alex and a small crew of workers had hand-cut enough structural lumber to repair the old farmhouse and build a generous cabin.

A wonderful micro-economy sprang up around the project. Nearby La Tirimbina Rainforest Reserve and Research Center donated several large cages. A few local carpenters were hired, other labor was provided by friends working off debts. A metal fabricator in town built a large cage in return for a favor Alex had done for him. The small clearing where don Rafael had cultivated *pejibaje* palms was laboriously cleared and three hundred native tree seedlings, donated by a local nursery, were planted. Alex's 20-year-old son, already an accomplished naturalist guide, began being hired by tourists eager to be shown the property's spectacular bird fauna. Some visitors expressed keen interest in volunteering, and individuals and a private college in San José contributed financial support. A few well-established environmental organizations began expressing interest in future involvement and financial support.

Does an undertaking like this justify the effort, or is it merely a way to comfort one's conscience? Even from a pragmatic viewpoint, this story demonstrates that an idea born from personal conviction can grow to touch the lives of many beings. Like individual raindrops falling on a pond, small undertakings send out ripples of inspiration and amplify other small

undertakings. Ultimately, “grass roots” efforts like this are more resilient to unpredictable funding and ego clashes than more grandiose, hierarchically organized projects--there can be no bureaucrats if everyone is getting their boots muddy. This project is not a new idea; it is a manifestation of the ripples sent out by other imaginative and compassionate thinkers and doers, the influence of writers long gone and still in our midst. In my case, I can point to one voice in particular:

“A reverence for the original landscape is one of the humanities. It was the first humanity. Reckoned in terms of human nerves and juices, there is no difference in a work of art and a work of nature. There is this difference though, in the kind of things they are. Any art may somehow, someday, be replaced—the full symphony of the landscape, never.” --Archie F. Carr³

To this I can only add a personal philosophical note, a belief that moves me forward regardless of dark prognoses for our future: Compassion-based morality has become a survival necessity. But if we ultimately fail as a society and bring ruin upon ourselves, or fail as a species and die out, the act of swimming, however briefly, against the current of demise is nonetheless significant. Any compassionate act elevates the giver to an atypical level of grace, and the act itself is undeniably significant to those benefiting. Within this microcosm at least, we are immune to the recurrent cold madness of human experience. My outlook dares to hope--we are in a race, neither won nor lost, and as much as the goals may seem elusive and distant, the privilege of taking part remains a constant reward.

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