

A Sense of Place
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Various writers of ecology and "environmentalism" have referred to "place." Thoreau wrote about place, as did Emerson, Twain, Muir, Abbey and Leopold. Dave Foreman wrote, when interviewed by Derrick Jensen in the wonderful book, *Listening to the Land*, "We are place. We are connected to everything, and we are open to the world around us."

This is fundamental. My fingers are connected to my hand, which, through my arm, is to me. My fingers are equally a part of me as the caribou is to the tundra is to 'place.' The Rocky Mountains are not just the mountains themselves, but the communities that live there, the chipmunks and pikas, the elk and the deer, the wolves and the eagles, the rivers and lakes, the forests and grasslands, the people and the air itself.



This is place, and none of these features exist in isolation. We, too, do not exist in isolation, and we do not experience the world in isolation - we're perfectly aware, or can be, of the breeze, of the silence, the sound, the stillness, the pulse, of habitat, the forest, the community, the dialogue, the space, the scents, of everything - ultimately, of place.

All this is present to us, in every moment. Our attention, however, seems to have become diverted, and we focus so intently on a subject, on a character, on a story (usually our own), that we've begun to develop a sense of separateness. What's missing is a sense of place.

Many people believe a sense of place to be the fundamental relationship missing from our modern lives, the center of the current ecological crisis we're witnessing (i.e., creating) and the root of many of our individual and collective dysfunctions. By "open to the world around us," Foreman means we are able to experience place as it actually is, to accept it, to learn from it, to

grow with and within it. In short, to be open to place is to love it.

By living the illusion of disconnection, we begin to actually to feel a sense of fragmentation, of incompleteness - it's no coincidence that some common synonyms for disconnection include decay, detachment, disengagement, disintegration, division, exclusion, fracture, incoherence, separatism, severance, withdrawal, etc. (perhaps the most poignant one might be divorce). The love we ought to experience for the land base on which we live clearly diminishes, fades and possibly even vanishes with this separation. Without love we will remain unable to care for the myriad neighborhoods, habitats, ecosystems and communities that we exist within. We replace love with whatever fable best hides us from actuality, be it economics, science, religion, politics, philosophy, or simply our everyday lives. None of these exist separately from love, but we pretend that they do. We relentlessly announce what R.D. Laing referred to as 'claims to virtue,' the veil of which conceals this reality from our perimeters.

Photography, I'm sure, serves to express, and simultaneously promote, our isolation. Photography isolates a single sense, a single moment, a single subject, a single relationship. Photography isolates a product and omits the process. The form of a given moment is rendered in photographic mediums as if it were a given, instead of just a given moment. This perspective is incomplete, inaccurate, and it lends itself to our misunderstandings.

Nature photographers often make a quick trip to some distant hotspot for some fancy snapshots of some exotic fauna, flora, landscape - none of which they share anything more than a brief, fleeting relationship with, a one-night stand, if you will. Wide or narrow angles only serve to render a portion of place, both visually and sensually. We see a grizzly bear on the tundra and we see the mountains beyond, and the birds above and we begin to delineate some arbitrary parameters. We shoot with a telephoto lens and capture a dramatic portrait. When, at the twist of a zoom ring, we widen our focus and capture some sense of place, we then call the resulting image a "habitat shot" or "environmental shot," as if the bear and the mountains exist separately from one another - yet neither can exist as they are without the other.



For our culture to move positively forward, we need to realize the connectedness our lives have with those around us. We need to relearn the intrinsic relatedness of communities, of the lives of the creatures with the homes within which they exist. We need to see the damage each new subdivision does to the land base we live on, to the rivers and waterways that are our lifeblood. We need to see that the traffic jams dribbling down the interstate every morning are a function of the lives we lead. We need to see the air pollution that warrants staying indoors on a summer day is directly and exclusively a function of the lives we lead. We need to work internally, rather than solve the external problems around us.

The caribou herds of the Arctic Refuge are threatened because of the lives we live in the Lower 48 States. Amazonian mahogany and Burmese teak, used to furnish our offices and conference rooms, are threatened because of the lives we lead. Bluefin tuna are threatened because of the lives we lead. We do not live in place.

We live globally, but our combined education, intelligence and consciousness are not great enough to live compassionately with that from which we're disconnected.

We simply aren't responsible enough to live globally and not exploit and abuse the land base from which our goods and services are extracted.

If we're unable to see the smuggling that brings us the timber, the slave labor that brings us cheap sneakers, the deforestation that brings us fast food hamburgers, what possibility is there that we will find the motivation to act accordingly? How rarely can a divorced relationship exist harmoniously? Further, what hope is there that we can find solutions to problems from which we're so fundamentally disengaged? We simply aren't wise enough to solve complex puzzles of a global magnitude.



Living in place means living locally. Place is the community that we live within. First and foremost, we must act with responsibility to our home, to the community with which we exist.

We must be loyal to the characters and processes that share this community, not simply to those of our choosing. Only by living more intimately with one another, with the land base, with the rivers and lakes, the plants and animals, with each other, can we hope to discontinue this war with the world.

By externalizing our focus, our efforts, our dreams and our intentions, by living larger and grander, we become more fragmented, disjointed, detached. We cannot expect to exist with healthy communities in such incomplete environments.

Our efforts are crippled by the industrial economy, dependent on the whims of a few Wall Street merchants rather than the actuality of very real goods and services, yet it dominates our activity. If we can learn to understand place, to know and to experience place, we can maybe hope to live within the land base instead of opposing it. We can begin to re-learn how to enter the landscape rather than grate against it.

A sense of place is:

where we live.

home.

our relationships, community, family, identity, self.

the stage that affords us ancestry.

the land base.

the mountains, the oceans, the air, the climate, the water, the forests, the plains and the desert, the fox, the bears and the caribou, the songbirds, mosquitoes, the flowers and the blossoms and the people.

the present moment.

everything, the only thing.

the only space in which we can exist.

bonding, is experience, is stillness, is silence.

the universe's expression of itself

the narrative of the wind, the stories of the land, the repartee of the waterways.

both infinite and finite, is simultaneously both the internal and the external.

a paradox.

reciprocity.

place is primary.

place is.



Carl Donohue is a passionate wilderness advocate, and his love of the wild has taken him from the outback of Australia to the mountains of Alaska. His writings and images have been published both online and in print, and his photography has won awards. Half of the year he resides in Atlanta, Georgia, and is frequently found in the southern Appalachians, playing guitar, hiking, mountain biking, kayaking and photographing. The rest of the year finds Carl guiding backpacking trips into some of the most remote and pristine wilderness areas in North America. Visit www.alaskanalpinetreks.com for more information. For a comprehensive collection of his stock nature, travel and adventure photography, visit www.skolaiimages.com.

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