

SILENCE HAS A LOT OF MOJO

Wild Horses and Brains Gone Bad

By Scott Thompson

"It not only takes a long time of watching the animal before you can say what it is doing; it takes a long time to learn how to watch. This point is raised, deferentially but repeatedly, in encounters with Eskimos." – Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*

On a cobalt blue morning back in July Gail and I piled into my buddy Amy Marsh's 2001 Suzuki Vitara 4-wheel drive, named Green Tara. Amy drove us west from Montrose, Colorado, over the Dallas Divide, west from the Uncompahgre Plateau, into the sunblasted Colorado semi-desert; land of saltbush and saline scrub. Green Tara rattled along the washboard road across Disappointment Valley, into the Spring Creek Basin Wild Horse Herd Management Area (HMA).

She parked along a low ridge that looked out on a broad auburn valley flanked on the left by the curving wall of a mesa coated with smooth grass. The cool blue ridge of the San Juan Mountains swerved down the horizon, capped by a line of tiny, cotton-ball clouds.

Silence has a lot of mojo. Standing there, I felt the bone-deep fit of a misaligned animal that has finally returned to its evolutionary niche. There, the tension from the ceaseless, discordant hum of a society alienated from wildness was gone: the faint whine of air conditioning, the whirl of appliances and small-scale machinery, the background music, the chiming and buzzing of cell phones, the endless human chatter, live or on television, the manic clicking of hard drives, the distant hiss of tractor-trailer brakes, the circular swirling of toilet water.

Intent on finding wild horses, Amy drove deeper into the HMA, toward the juniper uplands; nearing the McKenna Peak Wilderness Study Area. I was content with the high voltage solitude we'd already found, regardless of whether we encountered any horses. Gail was simply enjoying Amy's company in her usual open-hearted way.

Amy abruptly parked Green Tara on a precocious high spot and we fanned out, walking in the direction of the road.

Amy and I have been friends for nearly twenty-five years. She is blessed with a no-bullshit internal ethical compass and ready laughter. She seems incapable of the dreary compromises in principle typical of the so-called pragmatists who hold positions of influence almost everywhere you go. That's probably because she's never shown any interest in diving into our culture's supersized financial hog trough.

Several years ago she left her work as a drug and alcohol counselor to enter a master's program at Regis University in Denver. She's writing her master's thesis on wild horse herd management in the American West. It's a thorny subject, and just right for her: her passion for being with the horses and seeing through the horseshit is total.

I think we all spotted the white stallion at the same time. It stood just behind the crest of a shallow ridge, studying us with exquisite care. Amy walked back and handed Gail her binoculars. It turned out that the stallion was protecting a herd of four mares, which we later saw feeding on grass along a thin creek tucked behind the ridge.

Motionless, the stallion fixed its attention on us for a long, long time. Reflexively I studied it as well, and in so doing slipped into a light hypnotic trance. Hardly moving myself, I utterly lost track of time. Yet paradoxically, I knew a long time was passing.

I had never realized that there is something about the way the human eye evolved that allows it to focus on the stance and movements of wild animals with uncanny precision, even at a great distance. When Gail passed the binoculars to me, they added nothing to the exactness of my perceptions. They only made the image of the stallion larger.

Shortly it was joined by a chestnut mare. She was the alpha mare, co-protector of the herd, as Amy pointed out us to us on the way back to Montrose. The mare and the stallion assumed exactly the same posture and gaze; side by side. I had the eerie feeling that one mind was studying us instead of two.

Reflecting on this afterward, I concluded that, throughout the 200,000 year history of our species, until the domestication of animals began just 10,000 years ago, it must have been a daily practice for humans and animals to spend hours upon end observing each other in vast detail. This certainly includes horses, since humans didn't start riding

them until circa 6,500 years ago. (See Spencer Wells, *Pandora's Seed*, 2010, pp. 14, 73, and "Equestrianism" in Wikipedia). They observed each other not only because they were afraid, but because they were fascinated as well. Today we humans dominate whatever creatures we wish, often altering their genetic structure to suit our whims and confining them to environments to which they are poorly adapted. During almost all of our history as a species, however, we have not experienced that kind of control.

By contrast, natural environments in which one species cannot dominate all the others are usually characterized by reciprocal relationships that function for the ultimate benefit of all: even predators and prey help each other survive in niches to which they are each fully adapted. There is a parallel in human relationships; those which are NOT based on domination require a much greater investment of time, care, and attention by all parties.

And are much healthier for all concerned.

One thing my work as a counselor has taught me is that a focus that is enjoyable for a person is much, much easier to sustain. And if that focus also helps pull her out of a depression or an addiction, which it often does, it has enormous survival value. It stands to reason, doesn't it, that when a focus with evolutionary survival value has to be sustained for extended periods of time, it is likely to have a relaxing, even a fascinating, quality? I think so.

In West Virginia, where I practice, I encounter that quality of focus most readily in the plenitude of hunters. The culture of hunting pervades here; that's because the woods are filled with deer and other game; the landscape consists of wooded hills and low mountain ranges that have never been put to

the axe for farming. I can see hunters' bodies start to relax and their faces soften as soon as I merely mention hunting. They readily admit that as hunters their chief delight is simply being "out there," deep in the woods, waiting for game.

Back to the HMA. After standing together another long while, the mare and the stallion turned to the right at precisely, and I mean precisely, the same moment, in graceful synchrony, and vanished behind the ridge. They had obviously agreed that they had studied us enough and needed to get back to the herd along the creek below to stand guard.

What blew me out is that I was certain they didn't glance at each other before turning, nor did one of them turn even a millisecond before the other. Later, Amy and I watched the videotape she had made of this moment and could find no clues about how the mare and stallion knew to turn at exactly the same moment. I was left wondering if horses in the wild are telepathic or have other powers of communication outside the ken of human experience. In this regard, note the following from the late Sioux writer Vine Deloria, Jr.: "The Sioux ... came to know the full scope of bird and animal powers. Eventually the people came to realize that birds and animals had more knowledge than we do, and thereafter sought animal aid in the chores and hazards of everyday life." (See C.G. Jung and the Sioux Traditions, Spring Journal Books, 2009, p. 116).

Amy said, "Last summer, I witnessed the Pryor Mountain herd on its home range, high in Montana's Arrowhead Mountains, and was astonished at how different they are from, say, my neighbor's horses. There was a liveliness and interaction between the horses and their surroundings I couldn't explain, but I knew was completely different from that of domesticated horses in a private pasture. The wild ones are constantly moving, constantly touching each other, always playing, fighting, grooming. There was a dynamic within the herd that was missing from the other horses I'd seen in my lifetime, all of which were domesticated. That dynamic, I found out, is the difference between a wild horse and a domesticated horse." (See "From Western Colorado," amyhm.wordpress.com; posted 16 Jan 2010).

We all agreed being out there was magical.

That afternoon with the Spring Creek Basin herd allowed me to draw tentative conclusions about some of their behavior: that they tend to observe humans from low rises that give them a good vantage point while allowing a fast retreat, and that they keep the body of the herd on lower ground nearby, perhaps along a creek where the grass is thicker. If



I'd had the opportunity, I would have kept up my observations, fascinated I'm sure, and would have tested the conclusions I'd already drawn until I had a sharp picture of their behaviors, and with it a refined depiction of their relationship with their habitat.

Pre-agricultural societies needed extraordinarily thorough descriptions of each animal and plant habitat in order to reliably find their food and prey, as well as medicinal plants and the animals they saw as allies. And to avoid a range of dangerous creatures and plants.

The following is an example of this level of awareness in a contemporary indigenous culture:

"Two Shuar men – Shakaim and Twitsa – and I hiked into the Cutucu mountains...The next afternoon, on our way back, only an hour away from their community, Shakaim raised his arm, signaling for us to stop. He and Twitsa stepped off the trail. They squatted behind a small plant, examined it, and exchanged words.

"Shakaim cupped his hands around the plant and blew gently into it. Twitsa looked up at me. 'It's sick,' he explained, pointing at the leaves.

"It was healthy yesterday,' Shakaim added, 'when we came along this trail.' He stood up. 'We have to report this to the elders.'

"They resumed walking; I stood there gawking at that plant. I could see nothing exceptional about it, no reason why these men would have noticed it in the first place. A couple of leaves had turned brown and fallen to the ground, but that did not seem sufficient cause for concern.

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and vanished behind the ridge.**

"That night, I received an education.

"Shakaim, Twitsa, and their families gathered around a fire with other members of the community. They described in detail the state of the plant on the morning when we headed up to the waterfall and the changes that had occurred during the ensuing thirty-six hours. Their accounts were followed by lengthy discussions. The circle of participants paid particularly close attention to an old lady who was highly respected for her ability to prepare healing herbs. She suggested that the plant had delivered a message: The trail was overused.

"A vote was taken. Although several people pointed out that there could have been other causes for the sickness, the decision was unanimous. If there was any possibility that people were contributing to the problem, then people had to take remedial action. A new rule was adopted for the entire community. That trail would be closed." (See John Perkins, Hoodwinked, 2009, pp. 188-189).

The arrival of agriculture and then modern civilization, however, upended such careful practices. Because humans now controlled the habitats of their domesticated animals and plants, survival was plausible without the exhaustive traditional awareness of wild habitats. So the old customs slowly eroded; people first became insensitive to such knowledge, and then oblivious to it. The fragmented comprehension that remained was left in the hands of over-focused specialists: herders, farmers, ranchers, forestry rangers, biologists and agri-business technicians.

It is in this sense that over time our brains went progressively bad.

Let's see what sort of thing happens when we combine the myopia of such experts and the obliviousness of the public with 0.8 degrees Celsius of global warming above pre-industrial levels. Note - I don't like to quote textbooks at length but in this case it's worth it.

Act I: In Which the Stage for the Disaster is Properly Set

"Prior to human arrival, burning of lodgepole pine occurred randomly, resulting in a patchwork of fire scars, time-since-fire histories, and age stands of lodgepole. After approximately 1920, effective fire fighting [watch your ass, geniuses at work] changed this pattern. Fires no longer raged out of control; the random mosaic of past burns was gradually turned into large areas of even-aged stands, interrupted by areas that had been logged." (See Lee Hannah, Climate Change Biology, 2011, p. 108).

Act II: In Which a Vast Horde of Crazy Beetles Descends

"Outbreaks of mountain pine beetle *Dendroctonus ponderosae* in western North America have resulted in the death of more than 100 million lodgepole pines (*Pinus contorta*). In British Columbia alone, more than 80 million trees have been lost across an area in excess of 450,000 ha [hectares]. The beetle is killed by winter temperatures below - 35 degrees C. Successive winters without killing temperatures resulted in population growth in mountain pine beetles in the 1980s and again from 1997 onward. Warmer winters and earlier springs meant that bark beetles could complete multiple life cycles in a single growing season, resulting in population explosions...The beetle is a natural occupant of healthy forests, but its numbers are kept in check by a diversity of tree species and ages. [However,] Fire suppression and logging have resulted in large areas of even-aged, mature trees susceptible to beetle attack, whereas warm winters have promoted population growth sufficient for an outbreak causing widespread devastation." (See Hannah, p. 95).

Act III: In Which This Cascades Into Killin' Critters

The pine beetle has also invaded the high elevation, long-lived Whitebark pine in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. Grizzly Bear cubs feed on the fat-laden Whitebark pine seeds in the fall and early spring, and because there are fewer such seeds, there have been fewer such cubs in Yellowstone National Park. Which in turn has affected the populations of animals upon which the bears feed. The demise of these trees is also resulting in reduced stream flows, which in turn is offing the number of trout in the streams. (See Hannah, pp. 111-113; Michelle Nijhuis, "Global Warming's Unlikely Harbingers," July 19, 2004, issue of High Country News).

Hannah's textbook doesn't say whether the geniuses who set up 100 million lodgepole pines to get mowed down by pine beetles also helped make the Whitebark pines more vulnerable to beetles.

But common sense tells you, yes.

Act IV: In Which Pine Beetles Invade the Universe

"Warming has allowed the beetle to extend its range northwards in British Columbia, breaching the Continental Divide, the last effective barrier between the beetle and eastern pine plantations...

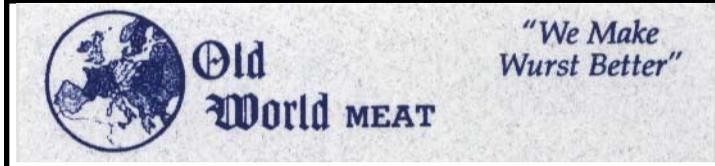
"Eastern forests of jack Pine [stretching way the hell across Canada] may now be vulnerable to mountain pine beetle outbreaks. If the beetle is able to establish and move through jack pine, it is likely to extend its range across Canada and into the forests of the eastern seaboard...the range may eventually extend into the great loblolly pine regions of the U.S. Southeast [stretching from eastern Virginia down through the Carolinas, into the Deep South and over into East Texas], decimating stands of large commercial and biological importance." (Hannah, pp. 109-110).

With the hindsight that innumerable climate change disasters will someday offer, pissed off future generations will see that a factor in our throwing away their future was our civilized ignorance of wild habitats. They will say to themselves, those mothers' brains went bad.



**LIFETIME
BACKBONER**

STEVE RUSSELL
Moab, UT

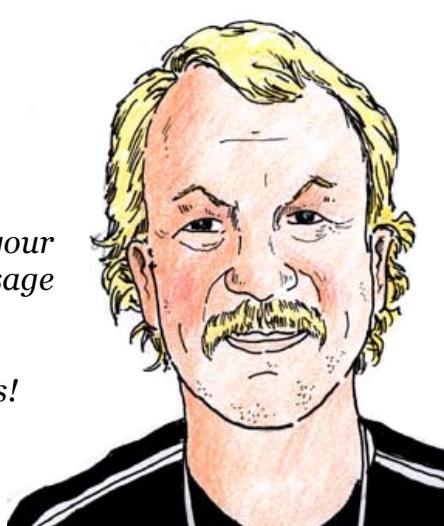


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