



State Of Nature, II

A few years ago Bruce Anderson printed a piece of mine, "State Of Nature," in his fine paper, the Anderson Valley Advertiser. Well, the situation has gotten worse, much worse. The state of nature is that it is being very rapidly disappeared. Alienation mounts, full bore, as we speak. And so, here is "State Of Nature, II."

There was a time when I could visit a patch of public lands, Great Sand Dunes in Colorado, for example, and be surprised to see people clustered in a little space in the Visitor's Center watching a video of spiders and lizards, their

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tracks and haunts, and other sights that could be experienced just outside on the dunes. I discovered similar strange scenes in other places in the west where public lands make up a large and precious part of our domain. My mild surmises of Visitor Centers and people management changed, became notched up to where I am now, in a State Of Anger.

One summer I hired on as a "ninety-day wonder" ranger-naturalist in Teton National Park. My duties were threefold: campfire talks, museum attendant, nature walks. I never really enjoyed the campfire part, a slide show where animals and plants and scenery were cast on a screen while the campfire spread a romantic glow over the folks from the adjacent camping sites who sat on logs in a neat little amphitheatre and listened to the three of us rangers take turns, droning on and on, using a pointer. I felt that we were skating dangerously close to robbing the people from going out to the forests, mountains, lake shores, and sage plains to practice their skills at animal finding and flower stalking. The nature walks were better because, even though the group was burdened with a guide who talked too much we were all out there where the breezes blow and the flowers might be attended by real insects and rotten logs might show signs of being clawed by a bear. Sometimes there were surprises without labels: a summer iceberg afloat on Lake Solitude, a cony up close, a woodchuck lolling on a huge hunk of granite taking the sun, a real bull moose at close quarters in actual willows, requiring a bit of maneuvering on our part.

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I like self-guided trails with little signs that tell you names of plants, outline some geological feature or point to physical reminders of history. Oregon Trail wagon wheel marks, for instance. Advantages of these modest trails, to name a few: you set your own pace; there is no ordering over-voice; you find, you discover, you smell and hear; you feel wind or rain, sun, heat or snow.

I thought I'd seen the ultimate stretch of this relentless robbing people of their own unique and personal adventures. I was wrong. Now comes Digital Wand. (Scott Silver -- ssilver@wildwilderness.org -- September 23, 2006: Destroying Cultural and Heritage Interpretation.)

MOUNT RUSHMORE NATIONAL MEMORIAL. For \$5, visitors can rent an audio wand and take a 29-station walk in English, Spanish, German or Lakota.

Ca wokisuya ki le justice na democracy ki Americans Indians ki wicakco na wiyuskinyan He Sapa el unpi kta.

That's the Lakota version. Translation: "This memorial to justice and democracy now invites American Indians to celebrate and teach their culture here in the heart of the He Sapa, place of the black cedar."

"Justice and democracy?"

Gerard Baker, a member of Hidatsa and Mandan tribes is superintendent at Rushmore:

America is full of all kinds of stories, both extremely good and extremely bad. And I think it's one of our responsibilities to give as much of that as we possibly can -- not to make people feel guilty or angry or anything else, but to understand the history of this place.

I wish Baker hadn't added that last clause, "not to make people feel guilty or angry or anything else." He must have been groping for the correct words to keep himself well within the bounds that cling closely around a superintendent in the National Park Service. I think I can understand that, but the notion that guilt or anger has no place in our lives, especially in relation to the Black Hills, is a dismissal of the trail of broken treaties stretching from here on back to 'seventy-six. And, for many whites as well as many American Indians, the imposition of those four presidents looming over all of us in hard stone is a monument to foolish pride and a signifier of raw power, a power that rearranges history.

But to get back to the tourist, that beleaguered wanderer on the steppes of auto frenzy, that nature-deprived man or woman or child. Is that voice from the five-dollar wand an invitation to the actual on a particular day? Particular days are the only days for states of nature. Particular days are different from every other day. It's yours, that day. You listen to wind howl or whisper or give you a sort of spooky presence; you notice and you feel. You can take that day home with you.

This story first appeared in Swans Commentary: <http://swans.com/>

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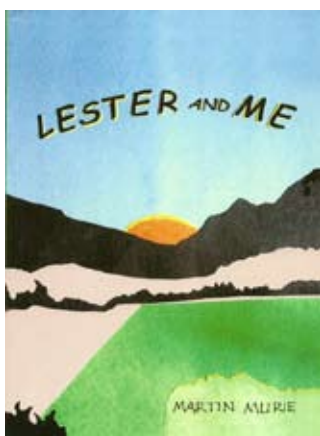
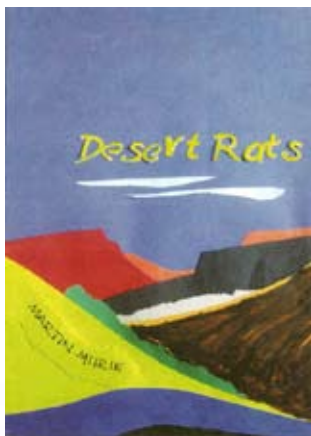
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