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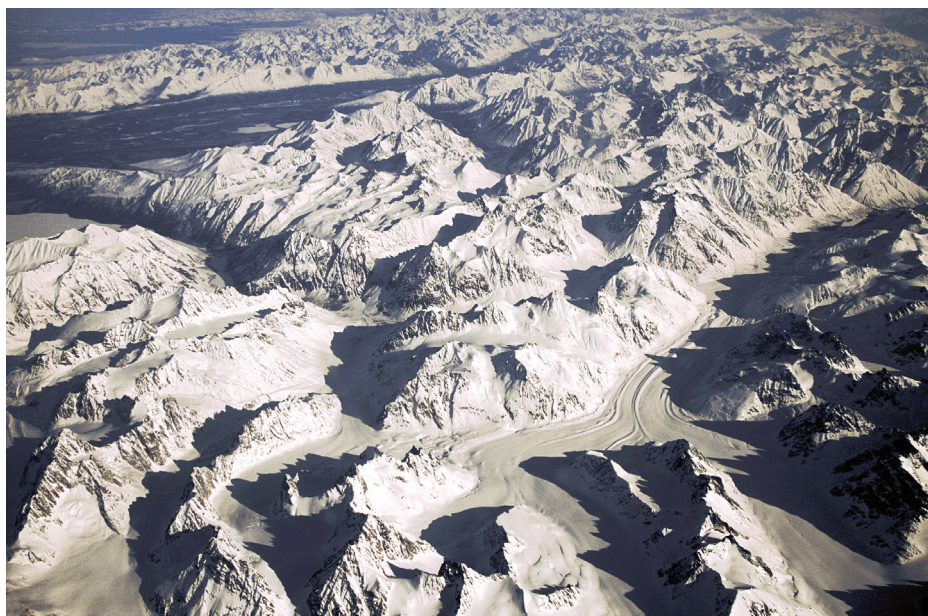
A Wild Way of Seeing

The little plane jumps off the dirt strip like a yo-yo on a blue-sky string, and I'm heading into the Brooks Range, Alaska. Airborne is a light, expectant world, with the ropes, the food, and the tents stuffed in the tail. It's expedition time. We're aiming to climb a couple of peaks, and stoked as a Fairbanks furnace to spend three weeks in the range. That's three weeks surrounded by unruly mammals, floating the Hulahula River, exploring rough drainages and climbing unnamed peaks. So this is a climbing trip, yes, but not the usual white knuckles, dawn starts, too scared to take pictures excursion. This one's about wilderness. After all, the Cessna is rattling along above the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge where wolf and grizzly, wolverine and caribou have danced the same dance for ten thousand generations. You've probably heard that the great threat to the Refuge is the oil *under* all these beings, and while our trip is organized around mountains, down deep it expresses a desire to witness this wild threatened place.

In flight, the Refuge's grand tapestry unfolds beneath me and on south past the horizon. Russets and tans, reds and ochres, a weave of lichen and watercourse, alder and rain, sustaining the Porcupine caribou herd and the other birds, fish and beasts that live here. Beyond are the mountains, insisting on attention to serrated summits and shining glaciers – bleak and nameless and mesmerizing as any flame to a moth like me. From that glorious perspective the plan to develop this landscape – to drill for money – seems a singular insanity.

But, the bug in my eco-sensitivity soup is oil dependence. We all use oil. I took a taxi, a rental car, and three airplanes to get to this fourth airplane full of synthetic climbing gear and white gas ... and now I'm protesting the oil companies' greed. Can you be a climber and an environmentalist? That's the opening question I chew. I recognize the paradox as our plane startles a fox, then rouses a blizzard of snow geese. Would we do better just to stay home? Or is there something worthy about these wilderness voyages ... some way to forge a sharp, green identity from the raw material of our urban selves?

But first, are you bored with Nature Talk? The familiar admonitions about stewardship and consciousness and sustainability have begun to make us all drowsy. Thus when I say 'environmentalist' your eyes start skimming forward because you presume I'm en route to some high ground of moral fervour. But wait; this isn't preaching and hectoring from some finger-wagging vegetarian. This isn't even the usual rhetoric of Green good intentions; that is vague, just where I want to be specific. I've thrown beer bottles, trod the desert's cryptobiotic dirt, killed animals and eaten them –



152. 'This is where the mountains live.' Aerial view somewhere over the Alaska Range. (Colin Monteath / Mountain Camera Picture Library)

not proud of it, but there's no green halo over my desk. I am, in sum, your basic modern man, but in my basic modern life of consuming and wasting there runs, I think, a surprising thread of environmental redemption. You see, for the last two decades, what I've mostly done is climbed, and I'm starting to believe it's climbing that has made me care about the natural world.

Until lately I've experienced climbing as un-political, engaged only with weather and stone and the occasional landowner's fence. But when I think about it, climbers have been in the middle of environmental battles for a long time. In fact, you could say that North America's leading climbers have been motivated by ecological causes for more than a century, and that far from being apolitical, climbing has a powerful environmental heritage. Consider John Muir, David Brower, Yvon Chouinard and even Henry David Thoreau – they went to the mountains, and then they devoted themselves to environmental causes. Look at it, Thoreau and Muir invented what we know as environmentalism, Brower created modern environmental action and Chouinard shaped the prototype for the green corporation. All this from climbers.

So back to arctic adventure. Once the plane stopped bouncing in sickening gusts, and left us by the Hulahula, we were climbers in a wilderness. No guidebooks, no other parties, no support beyond the gear we could float on the river or carry on our backs. That's a pretty pure relationship, isn't it? I've always defined my own environmentalism by my presence in the

wild. I care about wild nature and I demonstrate that with regular journeys to wilderness. The landscape of activism and petitions and board meetings is a nice place to visit, but I've never wanted to live there. So there I was in the cold wind with gathering clouds, a silty river, grizzly tracks and a big smile.

On the tundra I had a place to survey the wild and draw some conclusions about mountain climbing and environmentalism. It's easy for me to love Nature with a capital 'N' when it's a splitter granite crack or a view over my fruity drink. That loving gets harder when it's a grizzly that just might shred my tent, or a crevasse that swallows someone attached to me. But that same stress makes some climbers emerge from the mountains as serious environmentalists. Wilderness climbing is surely about paying close attention to the rock or the ice or the scree, and in that attention we internalise some lens that reshapes our perceptions afterwards. In contrast, a trip to the local crag is too easy. I have come to believe that intense experience in wild land reorganizes our brains. Wild climbing, then, gives us a wild way of seeing.

The upper river was shallow and cold. 'Shallow' as in jump out and drag the raft over braid after gravel braid, and 'cold' as in lose feeling in your fingers from the splashing, and cringe when feeling came and went to frosted toes in rubber boots. We dragged as much as floated those first days, but every frothing corner brought us deeper water until the dominant feeling was momentum. My eyes lifted from reading the river and all around was the green brown tartan of the country. Antlers on the bank, birds rising from the eddies, and twice a flash of fur where a wolf or a fox ducked to cover. At first brush, this arctic river seems a lonely spot. Named a century ago by Hawaiian whalers, the Hulahula winds through the biggest, wildest stretch of country on the continent. No sign of human visitors, no planes overhead, not even a cairn or a trail. The paths here are made by caribou, and then by the predators who pursue the caribou, and then by the scavengers who follow the predators. That blood balance makes brushstrokes against the canvas of water moving, willow thriving, and wind-packed snow. Soon, though, the big country welcomes you, and in the river's splash and rattle, and in the breeze's nipping chill, some kind of home is readied for the dodging, wheedling mind.

It's day four, and I'm following a game trail that contours up big hills. Finally I'm away from the river sound, that sandpaper white noise that shapes your days and scratches even your dreams. Behind me come three other backpacks, dark rectangles against the green-brown land and the grey shoelace of river. There's some rain from drooping mist, and the mosquitoes are inspired by our visit. This day matches terrain to map, and delivers a tidy pass that transfers our damp selves from broad river drainage to tight glacial valley. This is where the mountains live.

When you walk on a glacier, think good thoughts. It's a turnpike of ice, and you can follow it to many exits. But it's also a breathing thing, marching downhill, carrying stones in its bosom, birthing creeks in its



153. '...a time of absorption in organic patterns carved by the river and by glacial ice...' Denali National Park, view from Polychrome Overlook on the trail to Wonder Lake. (Dick Sale / Mountain Camera Picture Library)

loins. Little wonder medieval Europeans sketched glaciers as dangerous dragons. They can for sure reach out and take the unlucky with them. So think good thoughts for the glacier gods, and they'll steer you away from sérac teeth and deliver you across flimsy snowbridges that cover the deep blue jaws of crevasses.

The Esetuk Glacier greets visitors with rubble, a grey tongue of stones atop even greyer silt. The bullet-hard ground sparked our crampons and lead us on towards pure blue ice. Here it was all water runnels. Glaciers everywhere follow this pattern and I'm fascinated by this intermediate realm where live water flows across frozen water. The forces in play boggle me, as tons of glacier creak along millimetre by millimetre while bright splashes dance downhill or, in the warmer hours, roaring torrents firehose trenches wider than any sidewalk, then plunge into the glacier's darkness. Those holes rumble and sigh.

After the realm of polished ice and running water we reached snow. The Esetuk broadened, turned pillowy and white, and the road before us undulated into a tumbled snow-mass, taut with black cracks. We walked south, backs to the Arctic Ocean, faces to the peaks. This morning was blue sky clear, so the view sparkled from boots to summits. We snaked towards the middle of the glacier, two rope teams, ice-axes squeaking, and wound steadily upwards, one foot then the next, feeling for dead spots under snowbridges, listening for different tones to our footsteps, watching for the hollow that indicates a hole. A few clouds gathered in the north, conspirators in dark cloth. I hurried now, impatient with the thought of weather denying the summit. This mountain hurry is a subtle thing, barely obvious from the outside, but inside me the breath comes faster, the pack chafes, the snow grabs the boots.

Then it was afternoon. Clouds jostled in a sky gone grey. The glacier steepened and took a moody colouring. A headwall to climb. Here at the base the Esetuk compressed, and bunched its skirt into pleats and folds. Pecking along through complex terrain I zigged across hollow bridges and zagged over gaps. The wind came up. In flat light I misread a fold in front of me, and there came the ill portent of darkness beneath a step where white snow had been.

Gravity. . . crevasse. . . falling is a lonely country – there's no one else there, and you don't speak the language. Thump went my heart, thump went the snow around me, and what had been white was black. I was dropping through and moving forward in the air, and beneath my boots was all space, but my forward motion carried my hip onto snow that itself collapsed but sustained me for a moment, and I felt myself surfing an unwelcome wave. Here was slow-motion crumbling, and my pack lodged briefly to my left, and my right crampon points met solid snow in front, and my whole tumbling, levitating, Mr Magoo self teetered there in space – ice crystals spinning into blue depths, a breath of deep cold from below, bag pulling sideways, some rope, and my axe ever hopeful in reaching – and then momentum, pick into far snow, and a new balance stomached onto



154. 'Beyond are the mountains, insisting attention...' Chugach Range, Alaska. (Doug Mathews / Mountain Camera Picture Library)

firm ground.

Tugak Peak means 'Walrus Tusk' and we climbed it in the building wind. The clouds had sailed onto us to become a regatta of shifting winds and hail. This was not the first ascent I'd hoped for, but it was a powerful experience in the sky. The north ridge was a bright ribbon against a dark coat of clouds, and it stitched us in three long pitches to the jumbled stones of the summit blocks. A short rope-length to go. Awkward stones frozen in improbable postures above a great space, and then the top. No more up, but big views of unnamed peaks in unlikely drainages. We four huddled into quick photos, and a soft broom of snow whisked at us, urging us down.

On some trips the summit is the point. You take a steep line to the top of Mount Washington or the Grand or even El Cap and you pause at the peak ... until, with the first step down, thoughts swing to hot meals, to music, to the soft furniture of civilized life. My thoughts do anyway. Maybe yours are more reflective. But wilderness trips are different. There's a thrill beyond the summit and beyond the technical challenges that usually engage me. These trips cast me back to an era when the summit was just one part of a longer journey that included trail-breaking and navigation, other carnivores, uncertain passes and a suspense that animated those approaches like ghosts in the woodwork. Ghosts don't come out for cairned paths or National Park trails. Here in the Brooks Range I was engrossed in that thrill, and by charting uncertain ways over untracked terrain I was exploring the haunted house itself.

How is this way of seeing particularly *wild*? Well, in wilderness I experience the world differently than when I'm climbing at Smith Rock or Little Cottonwood. The difference isn't in the motions I make, or the heights I feel, it's in the texture of my perception.

Texture? What does that mean?

It means that climbing at the crag is like being in the city for me because my mind is occupied with a route's name, its grade and who is waiting to get on it next. It means my experience is formed by other people's ideas. Alternatively, in wilderness I'm not comparing my efforts to the description in the guide, or the person who just bled all over the crimpers. I'm just climbing and everything's on, and I'm tuned to all the input of stone and shade and snow. That broad awareness makes the natural world somehow denser, less a field for human titillation, and much more its own tightly woven soul.

John Muir wrote of mountaineering as a way to fuller living.

'Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like Autumn leaves.'

For Muir, being in the mountains affirms the best parts of being human, and any weather is good for climbing because climbing is about wildness itself, not just summits. Having said all that, I'm not sure freshness blew into us on the long descent from Tugak Peak, and I know cares didn't 'drop off' when we had to wade the swollen creek to get back to dinner. But, there was a pulse of energy throughout because the adventure wasn't done, the climb hadn't ended anything. We were still two days from our raft and deep in the process of living in a landscape and following its script of wind and cloudburst, trail and flow. That extended immersion gave us the mountains' good tidings, and opened us to the language of wilderness.

Our high camp gave us remarkable views north to the Arctic Ocean and its quilt of bright white pack ice. Beyond sight to the west squatted Prudhoe Bay and the massive thrumming installation there pumping oil – beyond sight, but very much in the picture, given the oil companies' plan to drill this same view. Drilling in this Arctic National Wildlife Refuge reenacts the formative tension in American environmental history between those who see wilderness as a resource to develop, and those who see wilderness as an inherent good with no need to pay its way in pieces of silver. It's a conflict as familiar as bears and dogs.

This archetypal American struggle can be summed up as Conservation versus Preservation and appeared in the 1890s when the United States began to designate the exact places we climb today as National Parks or Forest Reserves. Interestingly, it was the storm of conflict over use in these new areas that John Muir's power as an environmentalist first sailed. Muir came back from the mountains with the message that they were holy places, and that wilds like Yosemite and Hetch Hetchy were vulnerable realms to be defended for the sake of humanity's spiritual and physical well-being.

And these places do feel holy, like temples or cathedrals, but I notice my

devotions are always accompanied by industrial products that are probably polluting some one else's sacred spot. There are two gallons of gas in camp, and if I lose them in a rapid, or they leak back into these grey stones I'd better hope caribou crap burns. So, I ask the breeze, is a climber automatically a conservationist, or is there something that prods me to preservation?

Here in the Refuge, the Preservationist stance is that caribou and wilderness are more important to the national health than oil. The oil companies respond that oil-rigs can stand beside happy caribou, and so they restate the Conservationist ethic that champions the 'wise-use' of resources for a country that needs the material, the jobs, the money. Preservationists from John Muir on reject these utilitarian values and advocate a natural world unaltered by humanity. Conservationists from Gifford Pinchot in the 1890s to the Forest Service today say Preservation is unrealistic and unsustainable in modern life.

That Arctic wind told me which side I'm on – there's some sternness about mountain experience, some rectitude of gravity and stone that sculpts a person into an effective representative for the environment. That's a pretty bold thesis, and there are a lot of us who never get deeper than our bumper stickers. That's why it's transformative for me to take a wilderness climbing trip – not Yosemite or Red Rocks, but deep wilderness. Out here I live Preservation. In this wild drainage the climb is more than a series of super-topo'd moves; it's the assembly of a thousand and one perceptions about landscape, weather, animals and ice. Somehow that broader net of interpretation brings me closer to Muir in both experience and attitude. So even though I'm burning gas to get there, being immersed in wilderness is my ticket to environmentalism.

Twenty days of wild country is a very good dose. All the forms are curved, all the colours blend, and the eye rests for days on only things that grow. It is this wildness that saves climbing from hypocrisy. Yes, we use the same oil we protest, and yes we admire the same wild we're busy using. But these lonely ridges and these untrodden glaciers occasion a new way of knowing the self – that frail dynamo at the heart of our world's environmental problems and environmental solutions. This is not Nature Talk in shibboleths or platitudes; this wild way of seeing is the means to a fuller identity acknowledging both human needs and natural limitations. In wilderness climbing the body encounters a world simultaneously beyond its control and hauntingly familiar. At the same time, the senses adapt into a context shaped solely by natural forces. What wilderness means for the body is a new – I might say dialectical – experience of the natural world as both independent of and unified with human being. What wilderness means for the mind is knowing itself as part of pervasive natural patterns, and not as a separate thought-box outside of nature. It's like learning some principle by experience instead of rote, knowing the golden mean from the pattern of seeds on a sunflower instead of learning it for a geometry quiz – where the first is alive, the second is an abstraction.

Galen Rowell wrote: 'At the heart of the climbing experience is a con-

stant state of optimistic expectation.' I felt that optimism on the lichen-painted tundra, and I know it's recognizable too in the uncertain joy of new routes. David Brower made sure his environmental message was a positive one: 'If you are against a dam, you are for a river.' And maybe that optimism is the complement to a climber's grit that makes someone like Muir or Brower, or Chouinard a powerful force – even against the big walls of a society fixed in its views. So, I've decided we climbers are no more hypocritical about the environment than the next person, we're just better equipped to see there's another way. We can campaign and we can sign and we can participate, and all of it will be energized by not only what we've seen but by how we've seen it.

My group floated the Hulahula through spray and ice, across gravel and into rock walls, over wave trains and under clouds, then made camp by a tundra landing strip marked by caribou antlers. There the mosquitoes were glad to see us, and I found myself stemming between this world of alder and bear and caribou, and the sound of the plane with its promise of beer and news and cotton clothes.

If you've arranged bush planes you know that *schedule* means they'll get you when they get you. So better than sitting and waiting, I decided to head up the last sizeable peak before the Beaufort Sea. I wanted to travel light so I left camp with a litre of water and two trekking poles for what turned out to be a 4,000-foot jog. Nothing remarkable to report about the climbing – hardly Steve House on Nanga Parbat – but a shaping episode to conclude this arctic voyage.

The tundra was boggy, and balancing twixt topsy tussocks gave way to splashing in bug spawning pools ... steadily upwards. The insects motivated a good pace and after an hour the tents looked like bright aspirin tabs against a green cloth. All around me was tundra lichen and puddles, a Pollock painting of bear sign and caribou antlers mingled with wolf tracks and sheep pellets and the honking of birds.

One ear I kept always open for a plane's whine.

Before much longer my stomach growled, and that reminded me of bears, so I sang out, breathing hard, attending to the wind, the smells that came my way, and the chatter of little birds. Solo trips in bear country are about as smart as nose-bleeds in shark pools, but I needed some altitude. Soon enough I was on rock and scrambling past mountain sheep trails to jump a craggy ridge which I climbed to the tippy-top. Not a fifth-class move on the whole thing, but the wild thrill was my companion since that setting demanded attention. Do you see? This solo scramble in the big wild was intense for me because climbing's fascination is the engulfing process, the loss of self to the necessity of grip and balance and hope.

We flew out the next night. Rolling above the Hulahula I saw birds beyond number wheel and glide south in a staggered vee of shaping wings. The flock's form above our starboard wing told me I was leaving the kingdom of natural designs for the realm of hard-angled, manufactured shapes. It struck me then that a short season in the Arctic was a time of



155. Jeff McCarthy – ‘a silty river...a big smile’. (McCarthy coll.)

absorption in organic patterns carved by the river and by glacial ice, as well as wind and paws and wings. Maybe as climbers we go back to the peaks to make the same motions and feel the same fear because their organic forms hold us, renew us, then send us back into the manufactured world calmed and even determined that industry’s patterns are not the only choice.

That experience of self-in-other becomes a wild way of seeing. For Wordsworth nature is restorative. His Romantic nature is the ‘benign’ place where we retreat when ‘from our better selves we have too long been parted’. Fair enough, but I think I’ve encountered a different dynamic through wild trips through wild places. In a rough corner of the Arctic I could balance just fine, but I was pushed to immerse myself in the land’s language of grizzlies, of bogs, and of mosquito hordes. That’s the point. Deep attention is the payoff for climbers, and may well be the way of seeing we all take back to this world of cars and bills and bosses. Does it make us ready to be environmentalists like Rowell and Chouinard and Muir and Brower? Maybe not in a direct, slip on a banana peel way, but that attention sure brings me back to this world with a better eye for its subtleties, and a louder voice for its preservation.

