

The River No Longer Reaches the Sea

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Nearly forty-nine years have passed since the first Earth Day, borne out of the environmental movement of the 1970s. Almost half a century, and yet we have not solved our ever-worsening environmental problems. Why? What happened? Is it simply that too few people care?

Some, such as author and philosopher Dale Jamieson, argue that our apparent lack of concern is a combination of several underlying problems – corporate and political greed, ideological resistance to policy change, and unwillingness to modify our lavish lifestyles¹. While Jamieson’s claim is certainly true, I believe those problems are symptoms of a still deeper issue. In my opinion, there is a relatively straightforward explanation for why we, as a society, fail to act on climate change even though none of us truly want to see Earth exploited and destroyed. And it is this: as individuals, we tend to care most passionately for the things about which we *know* the most; and since over eighty percent of Americans now live in cities², we don’t know much, if anything, about nature. Not from firsthand experience, at least, which is infinitely more valuable than indirect experience through zoos, movies, and nature documentaries. To care about the earth – to truly care enough to stand up and shout that *this destruction is unacceptable* – we must become so intimately familiar with the natural world that we react to its destruction from the gut, and we must not cease from shouting until every ear in the world is listening.

As a society, we are less familiar with our natural environment than at any other time in human history. Two hundred years ago, around ninety percent of the American population lived

¹ Jamieson, Dale. *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed - and What It Means for Our Future*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.

² Ingraham, Christopher. "Americans Say There's Not Much Appeal to Big-city Living. Why Do so Many of Us Live There?" The Washington Post. December 18, 2018. Accessed February 01, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2018/12/18/americans-say-theres-not-much-appeal-big-city-living-why-do-so-many-us-live-there/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.624990692bd7.

on farms; today, that figure has dropped to less than two percent³. Today's children spend, on average, five to eight hours in front of a screen⁴. These statistics alone are distressing, but arguably worse is the fact that many of us don't even know what we're missing. Our society is exceedingly disconnected from the natural world. It is, to paraphrase biologist Thomas Huxley, as though we are living in an art gallery in which nine-tenths of the beautiful paintings have their faces turned to the wall. This lack of awareness matters because, if we cannot grasp the magnitude of what is being lost, we will never be concerned enough to take action.

Fortunately, we can learn to care. We can teach others, who will teach others, until our whole society knows and loves nature so completely that we will fight with all our heart to stop the worst effects of climate change. So the most important question is this: what must we learn so that we treasure the natural world enough to save it?

As the late artist-naturalist Ellen Meloy wrote so eloquently, we must get right down to the skin of the world⁵. We must sit up, be present, and learn about the world that surrounds us, about the water, and the stars, and the sunlight on canyon walls. We must become acquainted with every living thing, from the smallest desert flower to the towering ponderosa pine. Only then will we truly know their value.

I can attest firsthand to the benefits of living in this manner. This past summer, I worked as a naturalist intern for a science center in Colorado. My job was to become thoroughly familiar with all aspects of the local environment and then teach the center's visitors about those things.

³ Waterhouse, Beth. "A Sustainable Future?" PBS. Accessed February 01, 2019. https://www.pbs.org/ktca/farmhouses/sustainable_future.html.

⁴ O'Mara, Collin. "Kids Do Not Spend Nearly Enough Time Outside. Here's How (and Why) to Change That." The Washington Post. May 29, 2018. Accessed February 01, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2018/05/30/kids-dont-spend-nearly-enough-time-outside-heres-how-and-why-to-change-that/?utm_term=.b648a6527697.

⁵ Meloy, Ellen. *The Anthropology of Turquoise: Reflections On Desert, Sea, Stone, and Sky*. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

Our mission statement literally began with the words, ‘To awaken a sense of wonder’, and that is exactly what I strove to do, in myself and in others. I discovered the hiding places of the local insects. I greeted all the wildflowers by name and learned to tell bird species apart by the shape of their tails. The more time I spent traipsing all over the mountains, the more I felt bound to the rich geologic and human history beneath my feet. And I believe beyond a shred of doubt that the depth of the knowledge I gained that summer will stay with me forever. If I ever lose my way, I will be able to find it again by tilting my head up to the sky so the constellations can guide me home. I will know where to walk by observing which side of a hill the trees are growing on. I know which plants will heal a bruise, reduce inflammation, and prevent scurvy. I know that the oldest living thing on earth is a grove of aspen trees, and that the sweet smell of desert sagebrush means the plants are communicating with each other.

Why does it matter that I learned about all these things? Why is it crucial that others do the same?

It matters because, knowing what I know, I cannot turn my face away from their destruction, any more than I could stand idly by and watch someone bulldoze my house. Ever since I acquired such an intimate understanding of the diversity, the beauty, and the interconnectedness of the world around me, I feel in my chest how utterly crushing the loss of it would be. I understand that because of climate change, there may come a day when I will not hear the chirps of a pika as I hike along a ridgeline. That all the glaciers may melt and no longer nourish the alpine meadows, and I might never again round a bend in the trail and find myself gazing upon fields of paintbrush or lupine. And because I value these things so dearly, because the loss of them would cut so deep, I refuse to sit back and do nothing to save them. My heart will simply not allow me to do anything less.

I believe that a greater concern for climate change will only arise when we as a society learn about the little things first. We must come to know and love our local environment through experience, and become consciously, genuinely angry about the threats it faces; only then will we be capable of the visceral concern necessary to combat global climate change.

Documentaries, news articles, and books unquestionably have their value, but there is no substitute for experiencing the natural world firsthand. You might feel a wave of emotion when you read an article about the newest proposed fracking permit near a national park, but it will quickly fade as your attention drifts to the next headline. If it really captures your attention, perhaps you will share it on Facebook, but that is the extent of the action you'll take; your anger is fleeting, and swiftly fades. Direct experience with nature, on the other hand, tends to leave a more lasting mark on your heart. Once you've spent enough time in nature, you will begin to care fiercely about what happens to it. Once you've spent weeks choking on smoke from wildfires made worse by climate change-fueled drought, a fire will ignite in your own chest, and you will scream at the top of your lungs that *something has to change*.

Besides the fact that many people just do not have the experience or the knowledge that compels them to care about climate change, I believe that we sometimes don't *allow* ourselves to care. We fear that if we let ourselves feel too much, if we acknowledge the enormity of the problem, the grief and pain will overwhelm us. After all, entire cultures, entire ways of life, are succumbing to the effects of climate change. The identities of the indigenous people in the Arctic are melting away, drop by drop, along with the polar ice caps. Ancient ruins are drowning underneath the rising oceans. Sacred rivers are running dry. The Colorado river is so strangled by dams that it no longer reaches the sea. These realities are profoundly devastating, and it is easier for some people to squeeze their eyes shut tight, stick their fingers in their ears, and continue on

living as though nothing is wrong. But this kind of apathy will not save us, and it certainly will not save the earth. It is absolutely imperative, for our own survival and that of the planet, that we remove our hands from over our eyes and face our fears.

As a society, we are teetering on a precipice, and we have an urgent choice to make. Will we throw our hands up, saying that it is already too late to save the world, and that nothing we do will make a difference anyway? Will we continue to turn our face away from the edge of the cliff? Or will we be brave enough to take the leap, to fight tooth and nail to save life on earth?

As philosopher Jack Turner wrote more than two decades ago, “something vast and old is vanishing and our rage should mirror that loss. Refuse to forgive, cherish your anger, remind others. We have no excuses.”⁶

Indeed, we do not. There is nothing more important than having a stable climate and an intact future. What we, as a society, have forgotten – what we need to remember – is that *we can absolutely have those things*, that they are our birthright as inhabitants of this earth. But we cannot wait for someone else to save them; it is time to take matters into our own hands. We must learn about the world we live in, and we must learn to care. In fact, caring is the most important work we could ever do. Because if we care deeply enough, we will have the courage to look the problem straight in the eye and say *no more*. No. More.

There is no other way forward.

⁶ Turner, Jack. *The Abstract Wild*. Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1996.

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