

HOLDING COMMON GROUND

THE INDIVIDUAL AND PUBLIC LANDS
IN THE AMERICAN WEST

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WEDDED TO THE CAUSE

Robert Schnelle

A few days of hiking in Washington's Cascade mountains doesn't feel like much of an environmental slugfest or a way of preserving anything, but it gives you heart. When my wife and I became "grove guardians" of several square miles in Wenatchee National Forest, we used our commitment as an escape, playing hooky in the backcountry under the pretext of saving trees. By September morning light, Lori and I did ground-truthing in wooded bottomlands. We penciled lines on our map for the unacknowledged motorcycle trails and the overgrown skid roads. We marked undisturbed sections of forest with a felt-tipped pen, taking care to amend our species count and our records of old-growth timber stands. But all of this felt to us like a married couple's retreat. Afternoons, as we loped along a serpentine backbone of ridges, we savored the internal hum that comes from sharing silence broken only by ambient sounds. Waist-deep tangles of thimbleberry, cedar fronds liling beneath the mist of a waterfall, bobcat tracks in the dust of an outcrop at six thousand feet—these were the benchmarks of our so-called labor as we paused to spread our lunch on a nurse log, holding hands as we rested. I scaled a hemlock tree and felt the wind rushing eastward from Snoqualmie Pass. Lori photographed the Stuart Range framed with yellow-tinged boughs of enormous larches. Days in the forest couched us in mosses while we dreamed at night. Asleep, we seemed to hear the scunch of footfalls in corn lilies. ⁵⁹⁸¹²

Later on, after posting our report on a website for the Cascades Conservation Partnership, we did nothing further but wait for the levers of organized advocacy to trip the wheels of government. Wendell Berry has complained about the "pinhole vision" of the environmental movement. But sometimes narrowness pays off. October brought news of appropriations from Congress that would protect local forests and help maintain a regional wildlife corridor. The hope is that enough patches of habitable

land might be linked to ensure the future of Northwest plants and animals. Owls, bears, and cougars depend on room to roam, to say nothing of the forest-dwelling Sasquatch, who may not exist, but whose fiction (if that's what it is) voices the spirit of the woods in uncanny hoots and howls by starlight.

Our own role in Bigfoot preservation, I know, was tenuous. The project we took on felt like a brief love affair, which was heightened by the release it offered from everyday life. Apart from writing one among dozens of other field reports, Lori and I had no part in the hearings, the faxings, the phone calls, and the strategy sessions that resulted, for instance, in there being enough shade for trout in Taneum Creek, enough acres of shaggy trees to allow the red vole—which never touches ground within its lifespan—to find itself a home.

Two years on, I think of the time we contributed as a vacation, an eco-tour minus the air travel and haute cuisine—some sacrifice, right? But taking credit is beside the point. With the White House occupied by the worst environmental president ever, we'd be foolish to dwell on success, whatever the scale of our commitment. If this is true for Bobby Kennedy and the big guns, so too for those of us working at the grass roots. Here in Kittitas County, Washington, we've recently learned that our elected board of commissioners is poised to sell off a stretch of the Yakima River's floodplain—"surplus" public land they call it—for conversion to the Stone Resort and Evangelical Conference Center. No doubt these wetlands will beef up tax revenues once the sale goes through, but the hidden cost is 12 percent of what habitat remains for the river's salmon fry.

So, although Lori and I would rather be hiking, we have decided to renew our political efforts. In the world most of us live in, there is no free love: doing right by nature means talking into a microphone in front of people who hold you in contempt; it means writing letters to the editor and noticing how pompous or goofy your words look when printed; it means crossing the boundaries of e-mail etiquette to wheedle support from office mates. In the case of an admired friend, commitment leads you to spend 350 bucks for a newspaper ad, later to discover that your carefully worded arguments have appeared on the comics page. And then there are

the meetings and the phone calls, the false hopes, the tedium, and the frayed nerves that attend the activist's calling.

No wonder so many people avoid causes. I, too, dislike them. Terry Tempest Williams has called the environmental movement "a lover's embrace," but it must have been people like Julia "Butterfly" Hill she had in mind. Hill is the young Californian who perched for two years in the highest branches of a redwood tree and saved a swath of ancient forest for her trouble. The anchorites, and those early Christian mystics who lived for decades on top of stone pillars, would have approved the urge that drives some of nature's friends to risk their safety. In several western states, goons have burned down the houses of conservationists; other greens have lost their lives in shady circumstances. Confined to an eight-by-twelve-foot platform, Julia Hill was buzzed by men in helicopters shouting obscenities.

For Lori and me, activism is more like clerical work—a lot of nitpicking and botheration. We put down the coffee cup and write a check. To propagate protest we click on SEND. It is strange that with the world going up in smoke, our efforts on behalf of life should feel so tepid. We bridle our emotions in order to appear sane in the eyes of decision makers, but we know it is they and their patrons, the powerbrokers and exploiters, who carry on in a state of delusion. Inwardly, we nod at Henry Thoreau, who asked, "What madness possessed me that I behaved so *well*?" This he wrote after harboring a fugitive slave and going to jail to protest the Mexican War. My idea of acting up is to circulate petitions.

Yet it is clear to anybody who reads *Walden* that Thoreau was nobody's dad. Like Rachel Carson, Peter Matthiessen, and many other lone-wolf activists succeeding him, Thoreau followed his calling beyond the family circle. This leads one to ponder whether his books would ever have seen print had Ellen Seawall replied, in answer to his proposal, "Yes: yes, Henry, I will." If middle-class environmentalists are meek, maybe our wives and husbands prefer lying next to someone who doesn't shout epithets in their sleep, a person for whom "fronting the essential facts of life" includes coaching in the junior soccer league. Perhaps we are reticent in order to protect our kids, who attend public schools with the kids of agribusinessmen and snowmobile enthusiasts. Under the influence of my fourth-grade son I only

daydream about monkey wrenching, and I make it a point to speak to our neighbors, property-rights vigilantes [though they are]. It's not that I refrain from taking Erik to the woods with me. He knows the cheer of a campfire and the press of roots beneath his backbone. He can explain why burgers hasten the death of tropical forests. Even so, I censor what I say around my son—I've learned to soft-pedal ideology. For children who worry about cargo pants and the amperage of their gameboys, outdoor time is precious. We shouldn't box in their capacity for solace.

In the end, my environmental movement is like a marriage. With all of monogamy's steadfast satisfactions and petty complaints, it's a habit of being that sustains the future through present sacrifice. It involves the sort of work that no one congratulates you for (nor should they), though you may feel you are living your life on a Möebius strip. For if we suppose, as some have maintained, that marriage is not a word but a sentence, we can face up to our covenant with the Earth. Though its crises keep licking our ankles like a flooding tide, environmentalism is the effort to *countenance* nature, as we countenance each other. It is our worldly wise way of declaring, with St. Augustine's god, "Love means I want you to be." In our modest campaigns I am blessed by my wife's company, the breadth of commitment we share extending to the land we live in, I hope. Days we seem to have worked for the good, or times when something precious was lost, are among the ties that bind us to matters [ever so much] greater than ourselves. To revive our passions we will still go hiking. We will sound creek bottoms with our walking sticks, bask on lakeshore gravel, and notice calypso orchids rising among the ferns.

Then, back in town, we will wonder where the salmon can shelter when the floodplain is smothered by putting greens. Then and there we will realize that together, our promises renewed and our paths worn smooth by others before us, we have to put our shoulders to the wheel.