Natural history as defiance of the technological takeover

Joe Gray

Joe is a field naturalist who lives in Great Britain. He has edited or co-edited several books, the most recent of these being *Cohabiting Earth: Seeking a Bright Future for All Life* (SUNY Press, 2024).

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In this issue of the journal, we feature a number of articles that champion or implicitly support natural history – the practice of attentiveness and receptivity to the more-than-human world – as being crucial for animating an ecological civilization. In fact, so skilfully, and with such buoyancy, is the subject explored that I feel little need, and barely more confidence, to add to what has already been said. So I sit with my face towards a computer screen in a tiny study (small enough that, without leaving my chair, I can touch each of the four walls using a different limb), and I wonder whether a single short paragraph could constitute an editorial. In struggling to find some other thread of natural history's fabric at which to tug, I stare into the rectangular mosaic of differently lit pixels but yearn for a distraction from the world outside the study's one real window. I am, after all, a practitioner of attentiveness and receptivity…

… A fawn-grey shape ambles into the periphery of my vision and I reach, from deep-rooted habit, for the field glasses on my desk. With an index finger on the focus wheel, I transform a blurred head into sharp living features: A fur-covered crown, the skin pleated like a montane landscape. Two ovate ears, pricked with life-defending alertness. And a nose, urgently quivering.

My view is of gravel-covered land, which, in the sense that it could be anyone's, is not mine. And I am watching a coney (a European rabbit). She is discerning odours and sounds with heightened awareness, the reason for which is evident in her eyes – or, rather, the raw pink swellings of myxomatosis that have deprived her of sight. By smell alone, the coney has located a part-eaten windfall apple. She consumes everything including the core and then proceeds, despite the facial dysmorphism, to clean her mouth and front paws fastidiously. There is an elegant recalcitrance in these simple ablutions.

The release of that disfiguring and deadly virus is one of humanity's more barbaric attempts to manipulate ecosystems. And by observing this latest victim,

I am reminded that such cruel, myopic interventions inflict suffering upon generation after generation of our Earth-born relations. This anguish is what can result from paying attention to the life around and among us. It comes too when we stop to contemplate the loss and suffering of a car-killed badger; and as we learn new things about a local river from a school of dead and bloated fish. It also arises with each coming spring when we ask questions about absent friends. Where have all the insects gone? How has the once-vibrant air been bleached of beating wings? And is ecosphere-wide slaughter and despoliation really something with which we are content to live?

Natural history is a window onto the woes of progress (as this short piece might have more doomily been titled). But the knowledge gained helps unblind us to the injuries and injustices caused by our species' technological march. It unveils those ugly truths of a society that pursues expansion with barely a twitch of doubt and that innovates with shallowly defined profit as the overwhelming guide. While we can read and listen to what others have to say on these truths – indeed, we should and must – it is first-hand observations that stir our spirit with greatest potency.

Leading us to question the norms of anthropocentrism is one of the means by which natural history defies the technological takeover of our existence. Below, I will briefly mention three of the other ways.

First, without any scrolling or clicking or streaming or downloading, natural history reveals beauty so rich that it cannot be adequately described. In *A Sand County Almanac*, within his contemplation of cranes (the feathered kind, not the mechanical simulacrum), Aldo Leopold wrote: "Our ability to perceive quality in nature [...] expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language" (Leopold, 1968: 96). Indeed, I doubt that words will ever be found that do justice to nature's magnificence. Part of the challenge is that, as Sandra Lubarsky has noted, "the world was beautiful before humans arrived on the scene" (Butler and Lubarsky, 2019: 97).

Natural history also offers entrance to the circle of ecological wisdom that is formed by knowledge-begetting-love and its less obvious converse – love-begetting-knowledge. In support of the latter relationship, Ed Abbey presented the following rhetorical question about nature: "how could you know it *unless* you loved it?" (Abbey, 1982: 72). Of course, an arachnophobe might be well-informed of spidery goings-on despite the lack of any positive attachment, but this does not, I feel, undermine the assertion. Furthermore, with significance to the discussion here, we are talking about a form of wisdom that will forever remain out-of-scope for artificial intelligence.

Lastly, in a point that is made well by Tom Fleischner in this issue, natural history grounds us both by fostering connections with places and by inspiring ecological humility. And this grounding, I would add, is something that hits all ideas of technology's supremacy with a sharp blow behind the knees. At the same time, the technosphere's expansive force must not be underestimated, and there is work to be done in restricting its encroachment on natural history (*e.g.* Gray, 2023). I am not saying that all technological advances lack a place in our practice of attentiveness and receptivity. Binoculars, for instance, are one

of humanity's loftiest interventions, allowing the observer of nature to keep a respectful distance from the observed. And printed field guides can be valuable tools too (Whyte and Gray, 2020). I am just stating that we need to be careful.

Before finishing my work here, I have a debt to repay to the blinded coney who gave me the thread that I lacked. With a sickening sense of pity, I resolve to perform an act of kindness in reciprocation. After retrieving a sharp knife from a kitchen drawer, I head outside and walk slowly across to the sloping lawn beneath the windfall-yielding tree. I pick three apples from the branches, cutting each one in two before placing the halves on the ground. As hemispheres, the fruit will stay in place and transmit more aroma to rabbit nostrils.

References

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