

## Box Essay 2.

## A spring of empathy in a barren landscape

by Joe Gray

“Why should one of those damn plants get the water? [...] Lots of people could use the water.”

An exasperated outburst from Lolo, the main character, in *The Tamarisk Hunter*

Paolo Bacigulapi's 2006 short story *The Tamarisk Hunter* pivots around the life of Lolo, who is paid “\$2.88 a day, plus water bounty” by the Bureau of Reclamation to remove tamarisks from the riverbanks of the US's desert south-west. In this tale, which is set in 2030, the alien status of these plants is not the issue; rather, it is that they are using water that humans do not want to give up. Our refusal to share water – in this imagined, but easy-to-believe, near future – with riverine vegetation is a frightening idea.

We know that water tables are dropping (e.g. Chaudhary, 2018) and that lakes are drying up (Weiss, 2018); yet the human population continues to swell. With the intense water-based conflicts that seem sure to arise between humans and the rest of life over the coming decades, we must not waste the current window for building a platform of ecocentric understanding and empathy.

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In September, my wife and I spent a week in an abandoned village in rural Aragón. Walking late one afternoon down a path that took us from the restored house in which we were staying through the barren and ruggedly pleated landscape, we bumped into a walker who told us of a secret river. More through good fortune than a knowledge of the local dialect, we managed, after about half an hour's exploring, to find a safe descent to the river – a waterway named *el Río Susía* in Aragonese.

Rejoicing in the serenity of this hidden place, I spent some time leaping between the dry patches of the river's exposed slabby bed in search of aquatic life, before the pressing of dusk sent us homeward.

Ascending, we noticed on the otherwise dry track a muddy patch. This natural canvas was crammed with tracks of the river's mammalian visitors: deer of different sizes, the splaying of their slots suggesting urgency; possibly a fox; and almost certainly at least one wild boar, with dewclaw indentations having the wide spacing characteristic of its kind. We skirted the mud to avoid erasing the beauty of the prints with our Vibram soles, as strong thoughts began to cycle... *There were so many prints... The river was not my playground but a vital water*

*source... The mammals must have been thirstily waiting for their turn... What a warm afternoon it had been, and what a tough summer... Why did I stay so long?... And there it was: a spontaneous, emotionally powerful feeling of empathy for other creatures. (This empathy born of a shared yearning and need for water can also extend to insects, as Ed Abbey wrote [Gray, 2018].)*

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Two weeks earlier, I had been walking near my home in England when I came to an unexpectedly high stream. Rather than see the challenge of picking a route across the larger stones through human eyes, my immediate thoughts as I approached it were *as a badger* – specifically, a female badger looking to find a safe crossing for her cubs. The reason for this is that a couple of days earlier I had been playing the video game *Shelter* (by Might and Delight [2013]), in which the player experiences the wild as a female badger sheltering her cubs from hazards. Again, a feeling of empathy for another creature had arisen in me, but this time through a virtual experience (for more on this, see Seegert [2014]). A similar experience with the potential to evoke empathy for aquatic life is the Ocean Odyssey digital aquarium, in which visitors are able to interact, virtually, with creatures of the sea (National Geographic, 2017). I truly think there is something in this.

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To conclude, sharing water is going to be an increasingly stern test of our willingness to behave as plain citizens, but our shared need for this life source also presents a rich context for the development of true empathy for other creatures, something which can be fostered through experiences both real and virtual. ■

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