

Interview with Doug Peacock

About the interviewee

Doug grew up in the Great Lakes region of North America and attended the University of Michigan. After leaving university, Doug served as a Special Forces medic in the Vietnam War, which was an emotionally harrowing and physically draining experience. On returning to the States after two tours of duty, Doug sought solitude and solace in the wild mountains, deserts and tundra of North America.

It was his presence in the world of grizzly bears that ultimately cured his demons from the war, and he emerged from his healing an eco-warrior. During this phase of his life, he met the writer Edward Abbey, who drew inspiration from Doug for the character George Washington Hayduke in his novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Doug has spent the last half-century fighting to save the grizzly bear, his own saviour, and he is founder of Save the Yellowstone Grizzlies (<https://is.gd/grizzlies>).

About the questions

The questions were posed by Joe Gray, an Associate Editor of the Journal.

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Q: What is your outlook on the state of the world today?

A: To put it mildly, things are really not looking good these days. We live in a society where the main premise is continual expansion and growth on a planet of finite resources. And we're bumping up against the walls of limits all the time now.

Q: What is the biggest change that you've seen in your area in the last couple of decades?

A: Climate change has really impacted where I live, just outside of Yellowstone National Park. Since around 2002 – or at least that's when we first noticed it – the temperatures have been so high that there has been a massive spike in the population of the native mountain pine beetle. Previously, there was a balance between the beetle and the trees that it feeds on, but now it has thrived to the extent that the large majority of mature white-bark pines have died off. This particular tree grows at high altitude, and what we saw was the tops of all the mountains round Yellowstone turning red as the pine trees died off. You didn't need to be an expert in ecology to tell that something really dramatic was happening. One of the major impacts of the pine's decline has been on grizzly bears, who depend on the high-energy seeds from the cones of the mature trees. So, climate change, here, has taken a huge toll on their population. At an ecosystem scale, wildfires are going to turn the forests of Yellowstone into grassland. And thinking more widely than that, climate change is going to wash over the Earth and create landscapes that we will barely be able to recognize. Part of this

awful problem is that wild areas are badly fragmented by human overpopulation and overexploitation, which means that climate change is going to hit the Earth doubly hard.

Q: For you, presence in the world of grizzly bears was a huge part of your healing from the devastating mental effects of serving in the Vietnam War. Given the declining ecological state of the world, do you think that the potential healing power of wild nature has also weakened?

A: No, the potential remains powerful. All you've got to do is go out and find it. That being said, I do think our culture is sliding away from the way in which people like John Muir and Ed Abbey experienced wild nature, where they immersed themselves in it, to more of a recreationalist, thrill-seeking ideal. Personally, I don't think you can draw on all of nature's healing powers sitting on a mountain bike, for instance. You have to be totally surrounded by wild nature. You have to externalize your demons and look at yourself from an external vantage point.

Q: Staying on the subject of the healing power of grizzly bears, what did you make of Timothy Treadwell's ultimately fatal desire to spend all those summers living with grizzlies in Alaska?

A: Timothy came to me after his first year in Alaska. Maybe he just wanted my approval for what he was doing out there. I gave him some advice. He didn't take all of it. His beauty, and his fatal flaw, was that he thought that the love and individual friendship that he gave to those bears was reciprocated.

He just didn't want to believe that bears operate with a different agenda. But that's where the healing power really lies, for me. The grizzly shows us our true place in nature, reminding us that we are not top dog. Here is an animal that could kill us and eat us any time it wants to. Now, for the most part, grizzlies are tolerant of each other, and by extension human beings – as long as there is abundant food. In Treadwell's case, he was there later in the season than he'd ever been. He was meant to be flying out of Alaska as normal that year, but he had an argument with an airline worker at the airport and ended up turning around and heading back into the wild. By this time, the salmon run had diminished, and the bears had lost their tolerance.

Q: As well as helping you heal, the grizzly bears have also inspired and motivated your own eco-activism. Do you still use your wire-cutters?

A: These days, I only use the cutters for freeing elk who've got their hooves stuck in fences near where I live. Now, even this is considered illegal, as it involves cutting fence, which is private property. But what's right or wrong, of course, is not always the same as what is legal or illegal.

Q: More generally, do you see direct action, or sabotage-type activities, as still having an important role in the fight to save the Earth and her creatures?

A: It's becoming trickier now, as the current administration wants to twist any and all actions that are made in defence of wild nature into domestic eco-terrorism. They do not see monkey wrenching – by which I mean actions just involving property damage – as something distinct from harming any form of life, and they instead lump everything together as terrorism, regardless of whether there is any violence or threat towards humans. This lack of discrimination reflects an administration that hates nature.

Q: It is no secret that Ed Abbey drew inspiration from you in crafting the eco-warrior George Washington Hayduke in his novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, and its sequel *Hayduke Lives!* Is it true that you got a letter from the publisher of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, in 1975, to let you know that he'd only drawn on the positive qualities?

A: Yes, it is true that I got that letter. And, that year, Ed and I hiked up a canyon in Utah, burned it, and agreed to never speak of the origin of George Washington Hayduke again!

Q: How important do you think that Abbey's work remains, today, in inspiring a love of wilderness?

A: Ed's work remains tremendously relevant. There are many people, myself included, who still see wilderness as being the most important thing to fight for. After all, it is our true ancestral home. And *The Monkey Wrench Gang* still gets a lot of new readers each year. Right now, I'm actually working on a project to develop a screenplay from that novel, and I'm going to try my damndest to do justice to it, both for Ed's sake and for the gang of folks who inspired the characters.

Q: It's more than three decades since Abbey died, but do you still think about him a lot?

A: I do. In fact, most years, on 16 March, I go out to his grave – the secret spot where we buried him, deep in the desert – and I speak to him. I talk to him in the same way I do to rocks and trees. It's good to hear your own voice bounce back in that way. It helps you reflect on things.

Q: And is the significance of 16 March that it was the day you buried him?

A: Yes, but it has a dual significance for me. It was also the date, in 1968, of the Mỹ Lai Massacre in the Vietnam War, which was a mass murder of unarmed South Vietnamese civilians by US troops. I was actually flying over it when it

“What's right or wrong, of course, is not always the same as what is legal or illegal.”

was happening, on my way out of Vietnam that day to go home and, although I didn't know it at the time, we went right out over where the massacre was occurring. In fact, I didn't find out about the massacre till a year later, when I saw the devastating photos of it that appeared in *Life* magazine. At that point, I was still fighting the war in my head, but my focus was switching to taking on the enemies of nature.

Q: What advice would you give to people seeking to fight for nature today?

A: I'd say this: Go out to the wildest place where you feel comfortable. Spend some time alone, surrounded by wild nature, immersing yourself in all that beauty. Then you'll be ready to come back and fight the endless war against nature's enemies. And you'll have developed

the true warrior spirit that, first and foremost, is fuelled by loving the Earth. ■

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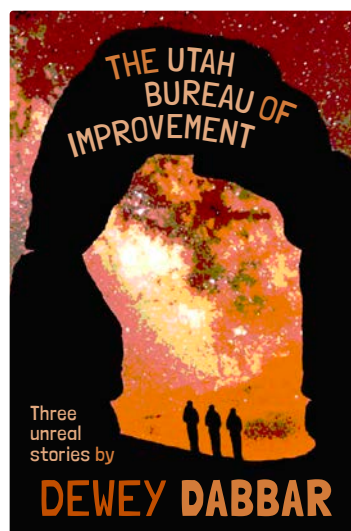
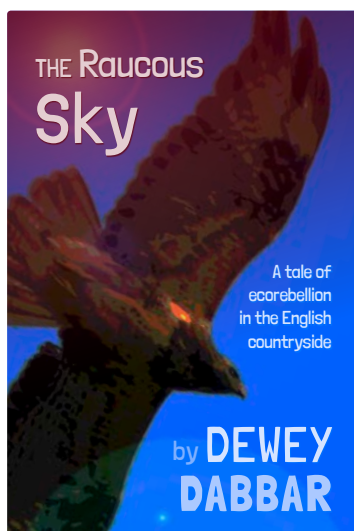
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