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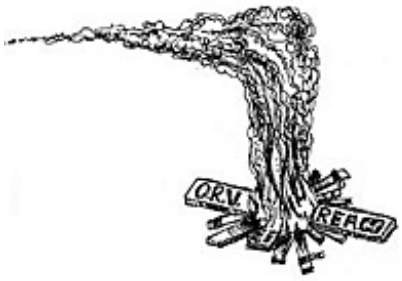
Around the Campfire
with Uncle Dave Foreman



Closing Keynote Talk at the 50th Anniversary of The Wilderness Act Conference

Editor's note: Given without notes or outline, this Campfire is Dave's closing plenary talk (October 19, 2014) from the conference to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Wilderness Act in Albuquerque. Thanks to Vicky Hoover for helping clean up the transcript. The copy here is nearly verbatim.

Well, thank you for being here on a Sunday morning. I generally don't do Sunday mornings, but I am very glad to be here this Sunday morning.

This conference has been thoroughly wonderful for me seeing so many old friends. And, in some ways, probably this is meant, me being the closing speaker, as recognition of rehabilitation for Dave Foreman, the bad boy of the Wilderness Movement, but I have to disappoint you all. I'm not rehabilitated, and never will be.

I thought the greatest pleasure of this would be seeing all of my old friends from the last 45 years, but actually my greatest pleasure has been meeting young people, like Christina, Monica, and others. To know that there are those coming behind you who share the same values, the same passion, the same commitment to action, is a truly wonderful thing.

The most terrible thought I could possibly have upon dying would be to think that there was nobody coming after me to carry on my work and that of my peers. I can die happy because I know that there are a lot of people coming to carry on wilderness conservation. As you will hear in a few minutes, as clumsy as I am and as adventurous as I am, that's always just around the corner.

Thank you, all you folks, who are in your 30s and 20s and younger, who are here, and those like you who are carrying on—because you are the hope of the future. You truly are the greatest generation and you have the greatest responsibility of any generation that has ever lived since we came out of Africa 50,000 years ago and spread around the world.

Your job is nothing less than to save Earth from all the damage all the previous generations of *Homo sapiens* have done. And don't worry, you've got plenty of help from the past. All you have to do is look back at the great champions of life on Earth, the great champions of humility, and know that you're following in those footsteps. You just need to have bigger shoes than we had and do more and really save it.

To show how this works, let's look at what human society really is. Edmund Burke, the great English philosopher and the founder of intellectual traditional conservatism—and there are no more intellectual traditional conservatives alive

other than me today—said, "Society is a compact between those who came before, those who are here now, and those who are yet to come."

If we look back on what Howard Zahniser, Aldo Leopold, Mardy Murie, Celia Hunter, Polly Dyer, and so many did, we are carrying on their work today, and we have a responsibility to live up to the example they set, to live up to the power and the passion and the accomplishment they had, and to make sure their accomplishments are not lost, but rather to take them even farther.

When Howard Zahniser was working on the Wilderness Act, he thought we might get 30 million acres. We have a hundred-and-nine million acres.

That is a tribute to my generation. But the task for you younger folks is to take it even farther. By the time some of you are my age, we need a wilderness system, on land of 300 million acres. And we need a wilderness system in our marine lands of 500 million acres.

So, you have a lot to do, but you also have to stop the extinction crisis. You also have to stop the population explosion; you have to stop the overcoming of the Tree of Life by mankind.

If we go back to the purpose of the Wilderness Act, it says, "Because of expanding settlement, exploding population and growing mechanization, unless we the Congress act now, future generations will have no legacy of wilderness to live with."

Howard Zahniser said, "We have to have the boldness to take the wilderness from the eternity of the past and pass it on boldly to the eternity of the future." And that is the job for all of us to do.

Many of us have been doing it. Some of you are just coming in to doing it. But that is what we have to do. And we have stay true to wilderness. Zahniser also said, "The primary character of wilderness is its wildness."

In that sense, wilderness is a compact between us and the land: that we will act with great humility and great restraint in whatever we do in wilderness.

There are times that we need to do some things in wilderness, such as the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance pulling cheat grass out of the borders of the Sandia Mountain Wilderness here.

But there are times that we need to be hands off and let the wilderness be. So we need to seek the humility, to respect the wildness of wilderness. But we also need to have the undying urge to experience that wildness of wilderness and to open

ourselves up to what one wilderness leader back in the '60s called the hush. And to me the hush is a key experience to have in wilderness—to be surrounded by the quiet, to be away, deep in your mind, from civilization and technology.

I want to call for a new campaign of quiet wilderness recreation. At one time, I liked to dash through the wilderness, 25 miles in a day with a fifty-pound backpack. You see a lot of country, but you see it superficially.

You are not stopping to meet the wildflowers. You are not seeing the birds. You are not learning their names.

I had a day this spring in the foothills of the Sandia Wilderness, where I was able to go on a slow walk, and greet 50 species of wildflower by name. That is because the wilderness is a wild neighborhood and you need to know your neighbors.

You need to be a polite, respectful, wayfaring visitor through this wild neighborhood and recognize who the folks are that live there. I consider curve-billed thrashers folks just as much as I consider you to be folks.

There was a tree that boggled my mind once, down on the Rio Cuchujaqui, south of Alamos in Sonora. It was a giant fig tree. It was huge. Its canopy could cover half of this auditorium. It had thousands upon thousands of branches and trunks and stems and twigs going out.

There must have been a few million leaves on it. It was the most incredible tree I have ever seen. And I have seen the redwoods; I have seen the Sequoias. But this fig tree just blew my mind and to me it represents the Tree of Life.

You see this sprawling tree spreading out its boughs for a hundred yards in every direction, and you walk up to it, to this low leaf here, and say, "Wow, that is us, that is *Homo sapiens*. What about all these other leaves? They are on the Tree of Life too. We need to respect them and respect their rights to be here."

So, for me, when I go into a wild neighborhood, I like to know who my neighbors are and be able to talk to them. That's why I am known among the hikers and the runners as the crazy guy who talks to flowers.

Because, how can you know your neighbors without greeting them? It's good to know their names too, or at least to greet them if you don't know their names and say, "Boy, you're sure pretty today."

Always pass out compliments to the birds and flowers, and other things you see. "Boy wind, you're really mighty today," those type of things. "Oh lightning, good hit. You almost got me." Be complimentary. Be friendly. Be a respectful wayfarer. I would just like to give some examples of appreciating the wildness of nature.

A number of years ago, my wife and I canoed the Noatak River, from the Gates of the Arctic to the Noatak National Preserve, for 375 miles in 22 days. Among my favorite animals of all are musk oxen, and we saw a number of them on the Noatak. Including one up on the twenty-foot high bench along the river, as Nancy and I were canoeing ahead of everybody else.

So I said, "Let's pull into this little cut in the bench here. I'm going to get up and go try to get some pictures of the musk ox," because there was another little cut separating us. I thought, "perfectly safe," so I was creeping up to that cut, and all of a sudden, the musk ox comes out of the willows. It had been traveling, too. There we were. Two alpha males staring at each other, but one alpha male was a very puny alpha male.

That bull musk ox snorted and pawed the ground, and started to chase me. Here I am, running across the tundra with this musk ox after me, as the rest of our party comes down the river and sees the scene up on top. Finally, the musk ox snorts, "OK, I've

Muskox chortling after chasing Uncle Dave © Nancy Morton

taught this asshole a lesson. I can let him go [snorts]. " And the musk ox wanders off that way, feeling really tough.

My friend Kenyon Fields got out of his boat after watching the race on the tundra and said, "You know, Dave, I can't think of a better way or place for you to die."

That was the finest compliment I've ever gotten in my life, because I was in a 16 million acre wilderness. To think about going out there, trampled to death by a musk ox, boy, what a way to go!

I had the commitment from Nancy that if I went, she would give the rescuers or the

people who wanted to collect my body the wrong GPS coordinates, so I would not be found right away and everybody could have a good time eating me before I was hauled off out of there.

That's a wilderness experience, and even though it was exciting, there was the hush of wilderness about it. You only hear the snorting of the musk ox and the pounding of its hooves. It's a different thing than being on the freeway.

I don't encourage everybody to be as clumsy and oafish in wilderness as I am. Every injury I have, I've gotten in wilderness and I can just sit back and start at my toes, and go to the top of my head, feeling every pain I've got and remember, "Oh yeah, that was such and such a place," and remember all those wonderful wilderness experiences that I've had.

I want to encourage you to seek the hush of wilderness, quiet wilderness. To go out in the wilderness somewhere, and find a tree, and sit down under it and go to sleep, or pretend to sleep, and begin to filter out all the sounds you hear, and try to parse them out and find who's making this little part of the symphony, and who is making that part of the symphony. Because at first, it's just as one background noise, but if you listen closely, you can begin to pull each out.

When you open your eyes, there might be birds in the tree right above your face. Or you might open your eyes because something falls on your face. But that, to me, is as great a wilderness experience as anything I've ever had. It's just, lie back, surrounded by the wilderness, and feel the hush. That's where we get humility.

I gave a talk this morning about the Anthropoceniacs, those arrogant folks who think that we have taken over Earth. They're high-fiving each other saying, "We're gods now. We run the planet. We're going to be good at it, we're going to do a better job, but we are going to get rid of all of this trash out here."

As Peter Kareiva, the chief scientist of the Nature Conservancy and a leading Anthropoceniac, said, "The passenger pigeon went extinct, but it didn't have any impact." Well, it had an impact on the passenger pigeon.

It didn't just ***go*** extinct. ***We slaughtered it***! That was a *sin*, and it's a *sin* to say the passenger pigeon “went extinct”, because that absolves us and our foreparents of blame.

Let's just look at the passenger pigeon. In 1803, John James Audubon sat on the

banks of the Ohio River, and for three days and three nights, the sky was dark from horizon to horizon as a single flock of passenger pigeons flew over him. He

estimated there were two billion birds in that one flock. By the time of the Civil War, there were still billions of passenger pigeons out there.

My family in Kentucky at the time, they had gone there with Daniel Boone, were used to the great passenger pigeon flights. Everybody thought they could never end, but then the telegraph began to call hunters in when there were great pigeon nestings. By the last great pigeon nesting, not of millions and millions of birds, but of only 250,000 birds, along the Green River in Kentucky, the hunters came in. They slaughtered the pigeons, maybe five thousand escaped, 40,000 were left on the forest floor to fatten the hogs that were herded in, and 200,000 passenger pigeons were loaded up in barrels and shipped on the railroad back to Baltimore to be sold on street corners.

There was a derailment on the track ahead, the pigeons rotted, and they were just dumped into a ravine in West Virginia. It was the end of a living storm. The last passenger pigeon in the wild was shot in 1903 in Ohio. So all hail the man or boy that did that, for he was the true soul of the American pioneer.

The last passenger pigeon named Martha, died in the Cincinnati Zoo, a hundred years and a month ago. I have often wondered about Martha, born in a giant nesting with a million other passenger pigeons, flying through the air as this living storm that made deer run for cover just by the beat of their wings, being surrounded by all of these other passenger pigeons. What an incredible loneliness she must have felt. Just an emptiness. When that darkness finally came to her, did she see before her closing eyes, the great flocks to which she had been born?

So, to say the passenger pigeon became extinct and it had no impact, to me, is one of the most grievous sins we can make. It's a wicked thing to say or to think. We have to have a much greater-hearted relationship with the world around us and all the wild things in it. Do we have the generosity of spirit and the greatness of heart to share Earth with our neighbors, with our fellow leaves on the Tree of Life? Can we rise to that?

The conservationists of my generation and the generation before us tried to lift us up to that ethic. But we are still far from it. That's why you young folks here are so important. Why you need to go out and meet all your wild neighbors, why you need to get to know them—so that their welfare is deep in your heart, and when

something happens to them, it hurts you. To get out and feel the hush, surrounded by wild things.

Whether it's just the little vest-pocket wilderness here or the great Brooks Range up there, we have to feel it, we have to open ourselves up and let nature come in. We have to be willing to take it on its own terms. Like my wife Nancy and I did this summer, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, we thought what better thing to do than to canoe the Sheenjek River—which Mardy Murie writes about in *Two in the Far North* and celebrate the Muries and celebrate the wilderness and canoe 300 miles of the Sheenjek River in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge.

We did and after our friend, John Davis, left us, because he had to take out early, we were gone for a month. We were all alone in 20 million acres of wilderness—a true blessing. But then there were record rains all across northern Alaska. The river flooded, and it was really exciting for a couple of relatively ancient out-of-shape people—dodging all of the snags, choosing which new channel to take.

Then we got washed into one channel where the bank was being cut out by the force of the river. There were sweepers hanging down and one took us out. Over we went in our heavily loaded canoe. For over a mile, we floated downstream, trying to hold on to the canoe, being hit by other sweepers, being pulled under water by currents.

We finally drug ourselves and our canoe out on a gravel bar. Boy, what a wilderness that is!

Again, I don't recommend clumsiness or foolhardiness such as I demonstrate. But it's a way to experience wilderness, and it's a way to

Dave on Sheenjek after canoe flipping © Nancy Morton

experience the real power of wilderness, and it's a way to find humility.

Humility, my friends, is what we need more than anything else in the world. We need a humility before the workings of nature. We need a humility before all of our wild neighbors. We need a humility before the process of evolution, which I see as the essential characteristic of wilderness.

That's what Lowell Sumner and George Collins saw back in 1953, when they first explored the eastern Brooks Range as a possible national park. It's Arctic Refuge now. They saw it as a place big enough and intact enough for the mysterious, wondrous process of evolution to go on and on, and for every species up there to be free to follow its own evolutionary tendencies.

We have gotten away from seeing evolution as the essence of wilderness since then. I think we need to bring it back. I think we need to recognize that we are just interlopers here, that we are not in charge of the planet, that we have not taken it over. No matter how much we may think we have, the price of arrogance, of hubris, as the Greeks knew, is destruction.

Never before has the human species been so arrogant, so full of itself, so sure of itself, so willing to talk about monstrosities, like the singularity--where we become machines and live forever. What a disconnect from life to have your consciousness in a laptop or a cell phone! My God! How did those people become so alienated from the wild world? Lordy, I'd love to drag them along on the Noatak and put them up on that bench against that old musk ox's will.

What we really need to do is develop an ethic again. It's Sunday morning, there's nothing wrong with talking about good and bad, righteousness and wickedness. To cause the extinction of other species is wicked. It is a sin whether you're secular like I am or a believer like maybe some of you are. But sin is sin, and there is no greater sin than consciously or carelessly causing another species to go extinct or to destroy the last of an ecosystem or to put a monstrous, poisonous mine in the middle of the Alaska Peninsula.

We ought to call people out on this stuff. Let's not be afraid of being ethical, of talking about good and bad, and how we need to rediscover good in our souls, in our hearts.

There are many ways to do that.

Now, let me just tell you, I'm multilingual. It's not just because Texan was my first language and I had to learn English later.

I'm multilingual in another sense. I'm absolutely fluent in cat. I'm also fluent in western scrub-jay. I'm not bad in musk ox. I'm not bad in raven. I can get by. But where I really shine is in chickadee.

"Chickadee, chickadee, dee, dee, dee." My God, what a song that is! When I'm up on the mountains and here comes a little flock of chickadees, "Chickadee, chickadee, dee, dee, dee." I'm just overwhelmed with joy. There's no more joyful sound

Mountain chickadees in pinon © Dave Foreman

than that but it's also a sermon. It's a sermon from the wild to us, saying “We're chickadees. And we're chickadees for being chickadees. We aren't chickadees for you. I mean you might enjoy us. You might be turned on by us, but we're chickadees for ourselves and we're good-in-ourselves.

“If you look up ethics in the Encyclopedia Britannica, it says that whatever is good in ethics, an ethically good thing, is good-in-itself. We chickadees are good-in-ourselves. We have a right to exist just as much as you do. You don't have a right to wipe us out and all our neighbors. Chickadee, dee, dee, dee, dee."

There is so much in that little song.

Such a sermon. Such a celebration of life. When I'm with Nancy, and hear a chickadee, I start going, "Chickadee, dee, dee, dee." She just says, "Oh my God! He's going to drive me nuts!” because I go on like that for 20 minutes. I'm so full of it. I feel like a chickadee myself and I'm trying to parse out all the things they are saying to me. And so, "Chickadee, dee, dee, dee." Say it, sing it. "Chickadee, dee, dee, dee." "Chickadee, dee, dee, dee."

Dave Foreman

Dave on the Noatak © Nancy Morton

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Pleistocene wildlife header graphic by Sergio de la Rosa Martinez

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