

## **Finding the Wild in a Pavement Crack: Commentary on Peter Kahn's "Encountering the Other"**

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*Gray's River, Washington*

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Peter Kahn's close encounter with the wild via hard, sharp objects in a backcountry river certainly caught my attention. My foot still hurts just thinking about it. I was also taken with how he is blessed with such a loving and prescient young daughter. Most of all, I read his essay as an eloquent entry in a gathering conversation about the separation of modern humans from the wild matrix of the world itself. The great publicity and enthusiasm for Richard Louv's book *Last Child in the Woods* (Algonquin 2005) shows that many people, including child development specialists, are thinking along these lines. Even the *Wall Street Journal* recently published an article entitled, "Plugged in, But Tuned out: Getting Kids to Connect to the Non-Virtual World" (Jeffrey Zaslow, October 6, 2005).

When I introduced the concept of the "extinction of experience" before an American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) meeting in 1975 and published it the following year, some people scratched their heads, yet many others expressed eager agreement with my premise: the depletion of diverse natural and cultural experiences within people's easy radius of reach (much smaller for the very old, very young, disabled, and poor) can lead to alienation, apathy, and lack of involvement in conservation, therefore to further extinctions: a cycle of disaffection and loss, sucking the life out of the land, the passion out of the people. Since I elaborated the idea in *The Thunder Tree* (Houghton Mifflin 1993), interest and understanding has mushroomed in direct proportion to the loss of children's special places of connection and the explosion of electronic blandishments. Another decade on, few children have tangled habitats close to home, or a free hour a day unplugged from soccer or a scintillating screen of some sort with which to explore them. Thanks to parents' fears of abduction, fewer still anymore own the freedom of the day ("Bye, Mom, see you at dinner!") such as many in my generation did—boys *and* girls. No wonder the time is right for Louv's book,

and for general recognition of the new condition named in his subtitle: *Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*. Time, too, when “no child left behind” must be augmented by “no child left inside,” if we’re to retain any hope of keeping the wild in the child.

Peter Kahn’s essay is his own experiment in blending personal ethic and experience with ideas and factual evidence, and it is an elegant and successful one. Out of the canyon of bliss and injury, Kahn travels literally and metaphorically to the high ridge Nabokov posits where “the mountainside of scientific knowledge meets the opposite slope of artistic imagination.” From there, through the accommodating medium of a rattlesnake seen close and well, he enters the Other and re-realizes its essentiality. But he worries that teleological reasoning, should it become widespread, might remain vacuous or flaccid “because of the paucity of content.” I’m afraid this has already come to pass. A great deal of contemporary environmental thought, none more so than the New Age variety often called “Deep Ecology,” too often suffers from deep ignorance of the actual working parts of the world. Practitioners adopt and preach an admirable ethical framework that seeks to suppress biocentrism; this is right and meet. But because many may be no more acquainted with natural history than with NASCAR, they are no more able to “speak cogently about the teleos of nature” than to understand ecology deeply. And when Paul Shepard (quoted by Kahn) laments “failed ontogenies” that “yield havoc” entirely out of “compliance with the wild world,” he is presaging Nature Deficit Disorder.

When Peter and Zoe get back to civilized safety, he watches her reading a magazine and reels at the sexually-charged vacuity of pop culture as articulated by *Cosmo*. Indeed, today’s double-message apotheosis of raunch—blinding us with boobs at the newsstand while vigilantes blow away registered sex offenders who’ve served their time—reinforces Kahn’s own answer to his question: “How is it in our society that *Cosmo* as metaphor gains purchase? The Other becomes a reflection of ourselves.” A reflection, he might have added, such as you might find in a loopy carnival mirror.

This is surely right. Yet I would add that we need not tear our flesh in the Wide-Open Wild or gnash our teeth in the Big Bush in order to encounter the corrective of the authentic Other. It is with us almost everywhere. Leonard Dubkin, chronically out of work and suicidally depressed during the Great Depression, found salvation through the study of urban insects in the streets of Chicago (*Enchanted Streets*, Little, Brown 1947). Sports- and nature-writer John Kieran’s *Natural History of New York City* (Houghton Mifflin, 1959) showed how the tonic of the wild can be found abundantly in Gotham, and that hasn’t changed since then. Last week, between trains in Portland, Oregon, I spent an hour in the fully-artificial gardens outside Union Station. Watching a nectaring cabbage butterfly ambushed by a handsome gray and yellow-spotted salticid jumping spider hiding among palm fronds, I was utterly transported in that anthropogenic confection no less than in a New Guinea jungle.

Regular, or even occasional, immersion in wilderness *sensu strictu* may wrench us from our self-obsession more directly or reliably than such a city incident will, but read bryologist Robin Wall Kimmerer's lyric rhapsodies on moss verduring the cracks in city pavements, and tell me it can't be done there as well (*Gathering Moss*, Oregon State University Press 2004). The extinction of experience, nature deficit disorder, failed ontogenies, the overwired child, the absence of the Other: these are all faces of the same problem, which stems not only from the paucity of open space and wildlands in our immediate environs or the infrequency of our rambles among them. They come at least as much from the epic level of our nature illiteracy, amounting to almost utter ignorance of species other than our own; and from our equally heroic inattention, in Nabokov's phrase, to the "individuating details" of any given scene. Thus, our lack of intimate involvement with place. The wild, the Other—the stilling phenomena and numina—can be found almost anywhere, from the wild sublime to the pastoral to the vacant lot, which is anything but vacant to a curious kid. But nothing is encountered, not really, absent the act of truly attending to the world, beyond the bounds of the self.

*Robert Michael Pyle* is a writer, biologist, educator, and independent scholar. His 15 books include *Wintergreen* (winner of the John Burroughs Medal), *The Thunder Tree*, *Chasing Monarchs*, *Where Bigfoot Walks* (subject of a Guggenheim Fellowship), and *Walking the High Ridge: Life as Field Trip*. He is also author of several standard works on butterflies, hundreds of papers, essays, and poems, and the regular column *The Tangled Bank* in *Orion* magazine. His paper, "Eden in a Vacant Lot: Kids and Species in the Neighborhood of Life" appears in *Kahn and Kellert's Children and Nature* (MIT Press 2002). Pyle worked for *The Nature Conservancy* and the government of Papua New Guinea, founded the *Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation*, and received a *Distinguished Service Award* from the *Society for Conservation Biology*. Recently he served as *Kittredge Distinguished Visiting Writer* at the *University of Montana*. He lives along a tributary of the *Columbia River* in southwest Washington.