

A Reworking of History

Bushcraft

Compiled by David Wescott, 2022

Notable Figures

Australia - Graves, Hiddens, Craig Brown
Northern Tier - Kochanski, Flat
UK - Mears, Kirtley, Fenton
US – Smith, Canterbury

Roots in Australian and South African colonialism
Adoption of North American tropes – Native American, Woodrunners
BP/Seton/Beard
Blending the two Redfining/sanitizing the term
Popularizing the brand - Not defining it
NA heavy addition of survival and para-military

Etymology - Wikipedia

The term bushcraft originally referred to skills used in the Australian bush. The word has been used in its current sense in Australia and South Africa at least as far back as the 1800s. Bush in this sense is probably a direct adoption of the Dutch *bosch* (now *bos*; transl. "forest"), originally used in Dutch colonies for woodland and country covered with natural wood, but extended to usage in British colonies to **refer to uncleared or un-farmed districts, still in a state of nature**. Later this was used by **extension for the country as opposed to the town**. In Southern Africa, they get Bushman from the Dutch *boschjesman* applied by the Dutch colonists to the natives living in the bush. In North America, where there was also considerable colonisation by the Dutch, they have the word bushwacker which is close to the Dutch *bosch-wachter* (now *boswachter*) meaning "forest keeper" or "forest ranger".

The "Bushcraft Dilemma"

To my way of thinking, Bushcraft and Survival are better defined as an ETHOS rather than a specific skill-set. DW

Ethos - the guiding beliefs, culture, or spirit of a community, organization, or individual.

The UK is responsible for the proliferation of the term as it was used to define "uncleared or un-farmed districts, still in a state of nature" found in countries they were attempting to colonize. The skills they learned to adapt to new conditions were a blend of military tactical skills, homestead arts and indigenous skills used to "live" in the conditions created by a specific location – long-term "survival" situations. The skills/techniques and materials changed with location, but the term came into

fashion to describe anyplace in “*the country as opposed to the town.*” It is a British term that has been used throughout the UK for decades.

The problem with definition comes about when these same skills are applied to the U.S. (Canada is part of the UK so “bushcraft” had traction there as well). When Baden Powell brought his concept of Scouting to the North America, he adopted the local term “Woodcraft” to describe the same skills – there is no “bush” tradition in America. The term was used liberally from the earliest days of North American exploration until the late 1960s when the skills fell out of favor and were replaced by the ideals of LNT.

Both “Bushcraft” and Woodcraft” skills (just the hard skills) were skills that came as a result of people learning to live in a new environment, and adapted many of the traditional ways of the original inhabitants, blending them with skills they already possessed. Of course both terms have been adopted and used for a variety of other agendas – ie Seton’s use of Woodcraft for the development of people, etc.

The dilemma is a modern one. UK programs have plucked select skills from their bushcraft past – sleeping in jungle tarps and hammocks, or carving spoons and kuksas in the Swedish tradition – but the core of what they teach are mainly North American or Scandinavian woodcraft skills, blended with local heritage crafts – **Traditional Bushcraft** as described by Ray Mears. Of course there are those companies who still specialize in travel to remote lands – **Journeying or Expeditionary Bushcraft** – but the majority focus on campcraft and woodcraft skills with a “bushcrafty” style. Rarely do you see skills from any other foreign land that was the source of “bushcraft” as a phenomenon integrated into modern bushcraft pedagogy – except maybe canoeing and winter camping. There is, however, an overarching ambience or romance connected to remote places.

The US, however, lost it’s woodcraft traditions beginning in the early 1960s with the wilderness movement determining all skills that could possibly impact the land as an anachronism. Blindly searching for decades, anyone with a recollection of or an attraction to the “old style” looked longingly for a home. There were a few renaissance connections – Calvin Rustrum, Ellsworth Jaeger, and others – but the term “woodcraft” became so co-opted by the router and table saw clan, that it was more confusing than ever.

In 1967, *Outdoor Survival Skills*, along with an entire genre of modern survival skills manuals hit the market. Those who followed Larry Olsen’s lead got heavily into **Primitive Technology**. Those with a Search and Rescue (SAR) / military leaning created the modern field of **Survival Education**. There was also a heavy blend of both influences among some groups.

In 1994, Garrett and Alexandra Conover published *The Snow Walker’s Companion* and popularized the phrase “*guiding in the classic style.*” The world of **Traditional Camping** found a home among winter travelers, canoe enthusiasts and traditionalists in general. In 2000, *Camping In The Old Style* was released and bonded another group – those re-enactors or living historians interested in recapturing another era – **Classic Camping**.

Mors Kochanski was approached by a publisher to see if he was capable of creating a North American version of Graves *Bushcraft*. That’s how the term gained traction in NA. He often jokingly recounted that he “plagiarized” LDOs *Outdoor*

Survival Skills, using it as a model for *Northern Bushcraft*, 1987. Mors later seemed to drift away from the term, rather introducing himself as a “Survival Instructor specializing in the Northern Bush.”

Since that time, the term “bushcraft” has found a home in the US with anyone wanting to sell something – a book, a class, a piece of gear – it’s become an amazing marketing tool. The problem lies in the fact that has no skill-set of it’s own. It, as well as the field of ‘survival’ borrow freely – and usually without credit - from all of the previous skill-sets, such as: primitive technology, woodcraft, aboriginal skills. Mears book was even originally titled *The Survival Handbook*, in 1990. Subsequent books followed with “bushcraft” as the focus, after the success of his TV shows.

So is **Modern Bushcraft** – as typically taught in the US and UK - built on a unique skill-set? I say no. **It is a style**, just like Traditional or Classic style. Is “Survival” a skill-set? I say no. “*Survival knowledge*” is primarily medical or information affiliated with emergency services; the skills are either military/SAR sourced (short-term), or based on primitive technology/woodcraft (long-term). Both fields are an amalgam of skills and knowledge, with overarching beliefs, culture, and spirit that make their approach unique – **An Ethos**.

BUSHCRAFT

... If you catalogued the accumulated knowledge of a society that lives close to the land, most of it would have to do with understanding the natural world and how it works...The rest of that knowledge would consist of how they interact with the land. We call that Bushcraft....So Bushcraft is the active component of our interaction with the world around us

Tim Smith

Bushcraft is the oldest and purest of outdoor pursuits...It's a personal blend of skills to become more self-reliant and less tech-dependent....Bushcraft connects us across space, time and culture...

Ben McNutt, Woodsmoke UK

Bushcraft is indigenous/local skills and knowledge employed to solve complex problems, utilizing the resources found in nature... This definition of Bushcraft is a synthesis of other written attempts to define it. This definition would work just as well to define Woodcraft.

David Wescott

Bushcraft is when you take a step closer to nature. Bushcraft is not just observing nature, but participating in it. Bushcraft is the human celebration of the natural world, in its purest form.

Sam Larsen

Bushcraft is the active component of our interaction with nature [application of knowledge]. Both art and science, bushcraft is doing, making, crafting, traveling, building and living in the natural world using simple, low-tech tools. Static knowledge, such as how to care for tools, etc., is a small percentage of the discipline. The vast majority is active, dynamic and hands-on.

If you catalogued the accumulated knowledge of a society that lives close to the land, most of it would have to do with understanding the natural world and how it

works...The rest of that knowledge would consist of how they interact with the land.
We call that Bushcraft. **Tim Smith - Jack Mountain Bushcraft, jackmtn.com**

Bushcraft is the term I employ to describe a deeper knowledge of the wild and of nature...the reliance upon oneself and on nature. In the study of bushcraft we step beyond survival and learn the subtlety that makes outdoor life both certain and enjoyable. What could be more natural than to recognize the wild things around us and find food, shelter, fire and water? Bushcraft ties us closely to nature, and at its core is respect for nature and all living things.... **That is the principle of bushcraft.**

I do not wish, though, to suggest that we should turn our backs on the skills and tools of today. Far from it - my hope is that we shall learn to use our modern tools more wisely by bolstering them with wisdom from the past... For me, a large part of bushcraft is about combining modern and ancient expertise.

Ray Mears, Essential Bushcraft, 2002

Ray's Philosophy on Bushcraft

Bushcraft liberates and empowers. It re-acquaints man with nature and his roots and provides an escape from the shackles of modern life. Bushcraft is about being practical and resourceful. Rather than teach ten things, teach one which can be put to use in a wide variety of environments. Bushcraft is not a sentimental retreat into the past, a re-enactment of Aboriginal life, an exercise in Rambo-style machoism, or a cult-like spiritual experience. Ray teaches but doesn't preach. He encourages people to open their eyes and see for themselves, to enjoy their own personal sense of wonder and discovery. He is merely a guide, passing on his knowledge.

What is Bushcraft?

Bushcraft is a term for the skills our ancestors used, up until surprisingly recently, to tread softly on the land and survive and live well with what nature provides us. The skill range is vast but includes, for example, fire lighting, tracking, shelter building, bow making, flint snapping and so on. The more you learn, the more you realize there is to learn!

Institute For Outdoor Learning

***Bushcraft is** about the skills and knowledge that allow you to thrive in a raw natural environment. Time-tested techniques, often passed down by aboriginal peoples, and simple yet robust tools that strive towards self-sufficiency. Bushcraft is about being resourceful and engaging in the natural world.....Bushcraft is the active component of our interaction with nature.*

Bushcraft New Zealand

What is Bushcraft?

A simple explanation of **bushcraft is** a set of skills to help you survive, live and thrive in the wilderness; often without amenities. Typically these skills are learned through knowledge and real life experience. However, bushcraft is about a lot more than simply surviving in the wilderness. It is also about sustainability and being

comfortable while living in the natural environment; it is about living as a part of the natural world with a more indigenous approach.

Bushcraft is about learning more than just one thing. Rather it is a group of interrelated skills that allow you to adapt and overcome obstacles in order to survive in the wilderness. While **traditional bushcraft** is focused towards survival in the wilderness, the mindset of using what is available to you can also be applied to urban and suburban settings.

Using bushcraft skills in order to live off the land is a very satisfying experience. Connecting with nature allows you to reset both physically and mentally; nothing in modern life can compare with this. Anyone of any age can learn bushcraft skills. Just keep in mind that you are leaning a skill that is done without any modern conveniences; it is just you and the wilderness.

It is plain to see what bushcraft encompasses. However, **bushcraft has recently been confused with wilderness survival** in many ways and for good reasons too. Many see bushcraft as having a pack full of tools and heading out into the wilderness to survive.

Traditional bushcraft is not about that and when it comes to discussing what bushcraft is just remember **modern day bushcraft has changed** in many ways and now people are interested in learning how the bushcraft skills can make them live and survive in the woods when the time and the need arises.

Robbie Jones, *The Practical Bushcraft Survival Guide* 2016

"Bushcraft" is a term for wilderness skills and is the practice of surviving and thriving in the natural world. To effectively practice bushcraft, you must master a unique skill set that includes firecraft, navigation, trapping, creating shelter, tracking, and the use of tools, both modern and primitive." **Dave Canterbury**

Bushcraft 101: A Field Guide to the Art of Wilderness Survival, 2014

Bushcraft

Bushcraft has historic roots, but in its contemporary form has come to replace "woodcraft" in much of the world, mainly through the involvement of the cyberworld and Ray Mears. The masters of today's bushcraft skills are people like Mors Kochanski (Canada), Lars Falt (Sweden), and Les Hiddins (Australia). Ray learned from these folks and many others, and has brought bushcraft to the public through TV and his Bushcraft School in the UK. Now, much like Tom Brown in the U.S., his students have started schools all over Europe and Bushcraft is now spilling over into the U.S. (Jack Mountain – Earth Education, Bushcraft N.W.). There are 3 bushcraft periodicals currently available in the UK.

The problem is that we have no tradition of a "bush" in this country (Canada does). We would call it wilderness or wildland – the turf of LNT and the nylon hippie – or backcountry – home of Appalachian folkcrafts.

Contemporary bushcraft is a homogenized version of woodcraft but spills into survival, primitive living skills, and para-military E/A skills. It is the modern counterpart of what used to be Woodcraft but with less precision/discipline and sense of tradition. Anything goes, including hype. DW

Bushcraft - Wiki

Bushcraft is a long-term extension of survival skills.... Bushcraft is about surviving and thriving in the natural environment, and the acquisition of ancient skills and knowledge to do so... These are the kinds of skills well known to our ancient predecessors, many of which are still practiced today as an everyday skill amongst aboriginal and native peoples around the world.

The term woodcraft denotes skills and experience in matters relating to living and thriving in the woods — such as hunting, fishing, and camping — whether on a short- or long-term basis. Traditionally, woodcraft pertains to subsistence lifestyles, with implications of hunting-gathering. In more recent times, and in developed countries, it relates more to recreationalism or survivalism.

Whether traditional or modern, woodcraft may be roughly equated to the phrase "living off the land".

Skills - Wiki

Bushcraft skills provide basic necessities for human life: food (through foraging, tracking, hunting, trapping, fishing), water sourcing and purification, shelter-building, and firecraft. These may be supplemented with expertise in twine-making, knots and lashings, wood-carving, campcraft, medicine/health, natural navigation, and tool and weapon making. Bushcraft includes skill with tools such as bushcraft knives and axes. A skilled bushcrafter can use these tools to create many different things, from dugout canoes to A-frame shelters. Wikipedia

Bloated Bushcraft

Somewhere along our modern journey, going to the woods became complicated. You may be under the impression that you need a specific list of "bushcraft" gear to get started. Beware of the wiles of marketers. You'll need some gear and we'll address the non-bloated bushcraft gear required to get started.

Bushcraft knives, bushcraft books, bushcraft gear, bushcraft YouTubers, bushcraft schools, and lots of shiny survival stuff are begging for your attention and money. Internet experts have a way of confusing beginners by using the bushcrafty buzzwords yet some have little field experience. Be careful who you listen to and learn from.

*The journey to any aspect of self-reliance begins by Doing the Stuff. This will take time and experience in the field. Your "wilderness" may be your backyard. No shame in that. The bushcraft-purist's protocol is not important. Practicing skills wherever you are, with the equipment you have, is where experience is gained. Experience carries more weight than head knowledge. **Todd Walker, 2016***

What is Bushcraft

Tim Smith

Jack Mountain School of Bushcraft

An Introduction to Bushcraft

For 99% of human history, our species lived in small groups of hunter-gatherers. They were directly connected to the natural world because there was no alternative. In the modern world, we've strayed from that path. Far from being connected to the world around us, many aren't connected at all; living in a world where every aspect is manufactured and unnatural. The result is that our connection with the land has nearly been lost. It's that feeling of kinship to the world around us; of living your life and spending your life with a connection with the natural world and knowing you belong there.

There's something powerful about providing for your needs yourself; of being close to and embracing the elemental forces of life. Thoreau tried to do this and so have many before and since then. They wrote books about the experience that many people have read. But a book isn't enough. To really know what it feels like, it has to be lived, even if only for a little while. The way we do that is through Bushcraft.

What is Bushcraft? If you catalogued the accumulated knowledge of a society that lives close to the land, most of it would have to do with understanding the natural world and how it works; knowledge of plants and trees, animals and the weather, and all of the intricacies of the world around them. The rest of that knowledge would consist of how they interact with the land. We call that Bushcraft. **So Bushcraft is the active component of our interaction with the world around us.** It's doing, building, making or creating, using the raw materials that Mother Nature provides. It's been called survival, woodcraft and many other names over the years. It's a new form of outdoor education, that when you think about it, it's actually the oldest form of education here is.

Contemporary Bushcraft

Traditional Bushcraft – Traditional Bushcraft follows to definitions listed above – simple tools, use of natural resources, getting closer to the land

Modern Bushcraft – Gear heavy and much more dependent on tech. Not well defined, but it's a marketer's dream.

Journeying Bushcraft – Following the lead of Ray Mears and his world travels to develop his TV series, some schools continue to travel to far-off places and visit remote people.