Woodslore and The Sentimental

Compiled By David Wescott, 2007

Hidden in drawer in the antique highboy, back of the moose head in my studio, there are specimens of Indian beadwork, bits of buckskin, necklaces made of the teeth of animal, a stone calumet, my old hunting knife with its rawhide sheath and - carefully folded in died paper - is the jerked tenderloin of a grizzly bear!

But that is not all; for more important still is a mysterious wooden flask containing the castor or the scent gland of a beaver, which is carefully rolled up in a bit of buckskin embroidered with mystic Indian signs.

The flask was given to me as 'big medicine' by Bow-arrow, the Chief of the Montinais Indians. Bow-arrow said - and I believe him - that when one inhales the odor of the castor from this medicine flask one's soul and body are then and forever afterwards permeated with a great abiding love of the big outdoors. Also, when one eats of the grizzly bear's flesh, one's body acquires the strength and courage of this great animal.

During the initiation of the members of a Spartan band of my boys, known as the Buckskin Men, each candidate is given a thin slice of the grizzly bear meat and a whiff of the beaver castor.

Of course, we know that people with unromantic and unimaginative minds will call this sentimentalism. We people of the outdoor tribes plead guilty to being sentimentalists; but we know from experience that old Bow-arrow was right, because we have ourselves eaten of the grizzly bear and smelled the castor of the beaver!

Daniel Carter Beard - June, 1920

Who hath smelt woodsmoke at twilight?
Who hath heard the birch log burning?
Who is quick to read the noises of the night?
Let him follow with the others.
For the young men's feet are turning,
To the camps of proved desire and known delight.

Rudyard Kipling

Many of us who have arrived on this trail of primitive technology have admittedly entered the way through the trailhead of Woodcraft and Camping … from the tales and writings of the early masters whose works were said to have been *"Books written for men, but disguised as if they were written for boys."* We admit to sentimentalism, but our zest for discovery and mastery of the trail arts have led us far beyond this starting point. But without honoring this starting point and using it as a guide to aid us along our chosen path, we become but wandering *Cheechacos* – greenhorns – with no more aim or reason for being here than the most lost of rambling souls.

It is through the disciplines of science, especially ecology, that we have been able to refine our understanding of how and why things work in nature. It is the application of precision that allows us to explore while maintaining a trail map of where we have been and how we got where we are. Halfpenny calls these interpretive levels of ecological science "natural history" – the realm of the Naturalist.

However, we can never discount the magic or serendipity that flows from intuition and heartfelt knowledge that comes from simply living on the land, and learning its nature firsthand. No science…just being. Many call this type of knowledge "woodslore."

Is woodslore a discipline? Ask any aboriginal youth who is on a walkabout. He has no book of science, but he knows the land, its moods and inhabitants intimately. Ask any project participant about hunting from a book or making buckskin from a video tape…the gathering of that traditional knowledge - *woodslore*, and the application of knowledge – *woodcraft, bushcraft, primitive technology* – form the foundations of what is called science, but they also hold an attraction, a mystery, that goes beyond the simplicity of science.

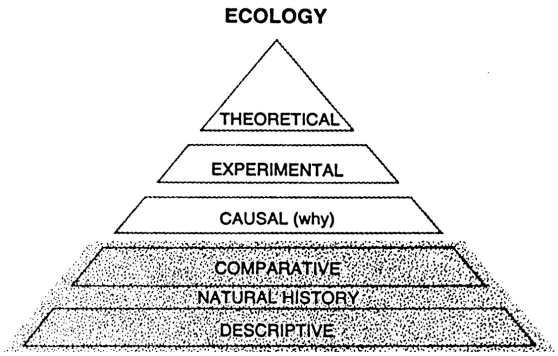
Misguided musings of a sentimentalists or not, those of us who have eaten of the grizzly bear jerky and smelled the aroma of castor know what I'm talking about. Try even getting an editor to use the word woodslore. To them they are two separate words that have no business even being connected. DW

Woodslore, Primitive Technology and Science

Primitive skills kind of involves everything. You have to become an ecologist, a geologist, and botanist. All of these things fit together because it all aims toward being able to live with nothing in a modern world. **Jim Riggs**

From *Oregon Field Guide* 2006

We are going to use the term "woodslore" to describe those sciences that come from the land and inform us of what we need to know in order for us to apply our skills. You need to know the woods in order to make fire. An understanding of the plants, and animal/bird behavior keeps us fed and clothed. Without a working knowledge of geological processes, we may never locate the rocks we need to cook, make tools or find water. Navigation by the sun and stars will help us along our way, while cloud-lore and sheltercraft will help keep us warm and dry. DW



We may visualize ecology as a five-tiered pyramid of scientific investigation. The base is formed by the broad realm called descriptive ecology. Descriptive studies are the earliest form of research. Our early ancestors saw nature and simply described their observations to their friends. Some of the earliest observers were the hunters providing for their families. Soon hunters began comparing notes. Hunters compared descriptions of animals and their behavior, in what we call comparative ecology. Spurred on by their comparisons, the hunters soon began to ask why different processes were occurring. The questions may have been as simple as why the hunters were more successful when hunting near the water hole. The questioning of biological activities and process represents the realm of casual ecology.

After development of casual ecology came the need to test hypotheses formed to explain earlier observations. Biological science enters the realm of experimental ecology when researchers design studies to test different theories. In more recent times, ecology has developed into theoretical ecology, in which ecologists create theories about biological structure and function. Some of these theories are not possible to test, at least at the current time.

These five levels – descriptive, comparative, casual, experimental, and theoretical – compose the science we recognize as ecology. The bottom two levels are distinctive in that they form the realm of science we know as natural science. Natural history is perhaps the oldest recognized biological science, but natural history is not ecology. It is only two of the bottom layers of the ecological pyramid. We would, however, argue that natural history is the basis of all ecology. As such, any ecologist worthy of the title cannot, should not, be but a naturalist at heart.

Jim Halfpenny
***Winter: An Ecological Handbook*,1989**

Woodslore From The Masters

Ages ago man was a savage, and though he has been under the restraining influences of civilization for centuries, the spirit of the savage is still stirring within, therefore, when he hears the 'call of the wild" as one of the popular writers has so aptly expressed it, I would advise packing up the kit and hieing off to some secluded spot to spend a few weeks in close communion with Mother Nature. **Elmer Kreps**
***Camp and Trail Methods* 1910**

"The people who always live in houses, and sleep on beds, and walk on pavements, and buy their food from butchers and bakers and grocers, are not the most blessed inhabitants of this wide and various earth.... What do these tame ducks really know of the adventure of living? If the weather is bad, they are snugly housed. If it is cold, there is a furnace in the cellar. If they are hungry, the shops are near at hand. It is all as dull, flat, stale, and unprofitable as adding up a column of figures. They might as well be brought up in an incubator. "

Let these words of Dr. van Dyke's take the place of the ecstatic dithyrambs which every nature-writer is tempted to embody ... Thoreau and Emerson and Holmes and Burroughs and Kipling have variously and beautifully given tongue to the sweet command,

" Come back to your mother, ye children, for shame "

and the many younger apostles of the "Nearer to Nature" faith are still repeating it in fairer words than I can command. **Edward Breck**

The Way of the Woods **1908**

Doug Elliott calls it "Memory Culture." You can also call it by other names like tradition or lore. The bottom line is that it comes from the earth directly to you and me. Many times it takes a shortcut through a mentor (teachers, books, videos), but none-the-less, we are eventually heirs to a birthright of nature. How sad it must be to be cut off from such knowledge – never knowing the taste of bisuitroot or cattail, the smell of woodsmoke, or the companionship of likeminded partners in search of an adventure in time.

The mastery of skills like braintanning, pottery, flintknapping, and travel without technology are all skills from the earth. Their traditions have been handed down from generation to generation, through direct oral contact. As Phillip Fagan says, "Woodcraft is lifecraft." Seton continues by stating. "By Woodcraft I mean outdoor life in its broadest sense .... *Woodcraft is the first of all the sciences. It was Woodcraft that made man out of brutish material, and Woodcraft in its highest form may save him from decay."*

And what is woodcraft? To me it is the application of skills (campcraft) and knowledge (woodslore). One can choose venues such as desert, mountain or water and modify the terms, but it is all the same thing. The big difference comes when we overlay technology. If we follow the training of the woodslore masters, we call it traditional or classic camping skills. (In our country today, woodcraft is the realm of routers and table saws. In other countries, the term "bushcraft" is in vogue. In this country, "bush" is not a common term). If we remove all modern technology and relay on indigenous or aboriginal lore, we call it primitive technology or wilderness/aboriginal living skills (there is also an effort to call them "earthskills"). If we continue to the far end of the scale – modern outdoor skills - the weight of technology is so heavy and invasive, that the skills required no longer have anything to do with the environment in which they are applied. Hence, Elpel's "chasm" – one that is becoming more real than imaginary everyday.

• **tradition (tre-dish'en) -** 1. The passing down of elements of a culture from generation to generation especially orally. 2. A set of customs and usages viewed as a coherent body of precedents. 3. Any time-honored set of practices.

• **lore (for) -** 1. Accumulated fact, tradition, or belief about a particular subject. 2. Knowledge acquired through education or experience.

• **craft (kraft)** - 1. Skill or ability in something, especially in handwork or the arts; proficiency; expertness. 2. To make by hand. 3. An occupation or trade, especially one requiring manual dexterity.

• **woodcraft (woodkraft)** - 1. Skill and experience in matters pertaining to the woods, as hunting, fishing, or camping. 2. The act, process, or art of working with wood.

Memory Culture: Folktales and family stories that trace a vanishing way of life.

Once I found out I could use the plants, the names would stick. And if I learned a story about how someone else used the plant, then it would help me relate to the plant. So I realized in my own teaching that it's the stories that make the natural world come alive to us. It's that human connection that makes us relate to the organism as a whole. The next thing you know, I was telling stories. I used to go and set up a booth at folk festivals – I would set a both with herbs, teas and old-time remedies – and the old timer would come and tell me what they knew, and the young people would come and ask me questions, so that was really a great way to collect information.

A lot of the culture I'm particularly interested in is "memory culture." So the experts are usually the elders…the old folks that really know the traditions – traditional lore that basically kept our ancestors here in this country alive.

The people who live in the mountains have been isolated longer than many other parts of this country, and so because of that they have many of the old traditions. They know how to use the plants, and they know stories about the plants and they often have a rich body of knowledge surrounding the plants and animals that live here. But some of that is being lost as people live under the illusion that they're not connected to nature…but it all comes back down to nature anyway. That's our source. I feel like I'm sort of preaching the gospel of "Look at the marvel of nature."

We usually don't want to preserve something we don't love, and we can't love something we don't know. So, I'm starting at the bottom … trying to increase my knowledge of nature…trying to derive inspiration from that and then try to pass on that inspiration through knowledge, through love, to other people.

From *Doug Elliott's Herbs, Teas and Remedies on Farmer's Almanac TV*.
Find a half dozen clips of Doug's unique lessons at
www.brightcove.tv (time in Doug Elliott on the search box).

Why We Need Woodslore Today

The art of nothing isn't just about going camping with nothing it is also about learning to be totally happy with nothing. It is easy to feel alienated from a landscape

like this if you know nothing about it. But the chasm that separates people from nature is both immense and imaginary. When you start to learn about the plants, the birds, the geology and the insects, then the landscape starts to come alive in a whole new way. The exciting things are no longer the fast and noisy distractions but the quiet mysteries of the universe, that unfold all around us. And the more you learn about nature in this way, the more you become part of it. Until one day you can be totally content with nothing more than the pleasure of nature's company. And then for the first time in your life you bridge the chasm to become part of the real world. **Tom Elpel**

From *The Art of Nothing* DVD #4

Woodslore serves as the foundation for much of what we know about primitive technology and woodcraft. It informs us on how to apply our skills. Is it always factual? There is room to argue the matter. Is it valuable for us to learn it and apply it today? No question.

"Gathering around a fire is one of the deepest images of our collective memory. From as long ago as 700,000 years we have me around fires. The fire circle embraces us, socially and culturally, even today across aeons of time. Symbolically it is something we understand, the cement of an extended family and community structures. Much about being human is thereby sign)fied: The social unity of the small group, the sharing of food and understanding, the anticipated collaboration in foraging, repose, reflection, and solidarity that could only come where the lifelike flame reached out as though from a common heart. We have progressed far in ecological thinking. We now need to develop an "ecological civicism", as Claude Levi-Strauss has suggested-one that restores the organic bonds of community. The essence of the fire circle should be maintained in our modern world as the central metaphor for such human gathering and sharing."

Paul Shephard. From *Coming Home to the Pleistocene* (p 155)