

Nature Ruminations while Metal Detecting.

by Conrad Vispo

Recently, I've taken up metal detecting as a fun add-on to our landscape history work. Can we use this as a way of dating those foundations we find scattered about the woods? Merrily test-driving our device around the fields of home reveals what most detectorists well know: the land is thickly scattered with metal bits. In a revamp of the Easter Bunny scattering eggs across the meadows, one can envision accumulated human generations liberally dusting the land with metal dross – broken harness parts, bent nails, tractor dandruff, etc. The image is an analogy for our pervasive impact on the natural world; traces of us are undeniably found almost everywhere.

It is this ubiquitous, often ecologically damaging impact that has led some to declare a new geological age, the Anthropocene. Geological ages were designated by paleontologists based on apparent shifts in geology and fossilized life. The logic is that our own hand in shaping life is now so dramatic that we warrant a new geological age. While the paleontological details can be debated, the sociological details may be more relevant. In the same way that heralding the arrival of the British Empire was an example of calling a spade a spade, but also added a legitimacy and pride to the creation of such a dominion, so too may acceptance of the Anthropocene help formalize our self-proclaimed role as King of the Heap. Consciously recognizing our widespread impact and seeking to reduce it seems valuable; legitimizing it seems unconstructive. Furthermore, there is a conceit in assuming we can judge ourselves to be one of the great geological forces of all time. I sincerely hope we don't need plague or pest to temper that conceit; perhaps time spent studying the amazing intricacies of the microbial world or watching butterflies flirt can bring humility enough.

In the conservation community, one response to managing our widespread impact has been to establish land conservation priorities. The practical logic is that, given the limited financial resources of any conservation organization, priorities must be established. Substantial brain and computer power go into figuring out which parcels of land would, if conserved, provide the most benefits in terms of habitat, migration corridors, and sustainable human use. I sympathize with this approach and applaud the work of land trusts and others in safeguarding land for future life, but part of me also bemoans public confidence in land prioritization as an abdication of responsibility by the society at large. While some creatures definitely need their space and hence their reserves, it seems a dangerous illusion to suppose that is enough. For example, in our own work we have seen that moth diversity of forest patches was partially predictable based on the composition of land use *outside* of those patches; no forest stand is an island. Can we direct will and resources not only towards identifying and conserving important parcels but also towards consciously melding our behavior *all across* the landscape more harmoniously with the needs of the rest of life?

How does that melding happen, through regulations or through a cultural consciousness derived from common beliefs and hands-on experience? There are ways in which anti-regulation perspectives, such as that associated with Libertarianism, are anathema to the conservation community - sadly, it has been clearly shown that without rules (and sometimes even with them, witness Volkswagen) discrete personal or corporate gain often tramples a more diffuse benefit to nature or human society. Regulation is one way to speak for the otherwise disenfranchised. And yet, we risk debating our differing stances towards the tool of regulation, when we could be exploring each other's core beliefs towards Nature and seeking diverse approaches to supporting that Nature. Even if we don't all agree that regulation might be one of those approaches, there may be other approaches (such as school programs, artistic collaborations, or technical training) which, absent ranting from a bully pulpit, we can agree on and which can potentially cross our polarized political boundaries and honor our shared responsibility to the life around us.

The future wellbeing of Nature will need the self-reflection partially illustrated by the designation of the Anthropocene, it will need the level-headed efficiency of strategic plans and land use priorities, and it will need some of regulation's muscle. However, perhaps these are but bitter pills to be swallowed until we as a society develop a more compassionate and encompassing understanding of our place on this planet.

The old orchard where I took our metal detector is clearly the product of the human hand - above ground in its apple trees and short-cut grass; below ground in its iron-laced till and who-knows-what other 'added ingredients'. Yet, while the trees produce apples for us and our friends in Autumn, they also buzz with bees in Spring, are patrolled by butterflies and dragonflies during Summer, and crossed by fox and deer in Winter. It is for various reasons not an ideal or idyll, but it has, in my eyes, ingredients of the holy, a cherished core of humility, sharing and freedom.