PERSPECTIVE

Science as Story

Carol LaChapelle

Nature writing—that category of American literature that examines our relationship to the land—is enjoying a renewed popularity among adult readers of non-fiction. Since 1968, with the publication of Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*—an account of his years as a seasonal ranger in southern Utah—writers such as Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, Diane Ackerman, and Rick Bass have reached ever wider audiences interested in both fine writing and the natural world. Much of this interest is due in part to the growing number of environmental problems that confront us as Americans and as global citizens. How we live in and with nature, and use and change it, is much in the headlines and on our minds.

At its most effective, nature writing is equal parts science and literature; it both informs and engages readers about the natural world. To do this, nature writers must first research and read widely in the environmental sciences, often interviewing experts in ecology, biology, and climatology about their work and its implications. They then turn around and "translate" often highly technical data to the non-specialist in prose that is accessible—even pleasurable—to read. To this end, writers rely on a number of literary writing techniques, including descriptive language and narrative, to present critical environmental information to a broad audience of readers.

While many nature writers have crossed disciplines and become informed about science, few scientists have ventured forth in the opposite direction. Those that have, including Rachel Carson, Loren Eiseley, Gary Paul Nabhan, and Chet Raymo, write with both authority and style, enriching the environmental writing genre with their unique science-oriented perspectives. They have also reached audiences far beyond their individual disciplines of biology, anthropology, ethnobotany, and astronomy.

And reaching a broader audience is becoming more important. Daily, it seems, ordinary citizens are being called upon to make many decisions affecting the environment: SUV or hybrid? Native or invasive species? Endangered birds or endangered jobs? Snowmobiles in or out of national parks? Preserve this wetland or drain and develop it?

To deal thoughtfully with these issues, citizens need to hear a range of perspectives—from the artist and the activist to the economist and the philosopher. And we especially need guidance from the scientists, those who have made this living earth, its flora and fauna, their life's work.

And how shall these scientists speak to us? Especially to those of us untutored in their specialties, often unfamiliar with the very words they use to communicate to each other?

E. O. Wilson, in his introduction to the 2001 edition of *The Best American Science & Nature Writing*, suggests a way:

> The central task of science writing for a broad audience is . . . how to make science human and enjoyable without betraying nature. The best writers achieve that end by two means. They present the phenomena as a narrative, whether historical, evolutionary, or phenomenological, and they treat the scientists as protagonists in a story that contains . . . the mythic elements of challenge and triumph. (Wilson, 2001)

In other words, the extent to which scientists can tell a story, i.e., use narrative to transmit technical information, is the extent to which we non-scientists can take it in and make sense of it. That's what stories do; they help us organize, comprehend, and remember seemingly random events and material. We are the storytelling species; before writing, we told stories to pass along the information we and our kin needed to survive. In many ways, we still do.

Not every scientist who writes for the non-specialist needs to become an expert storyteller or literary writer (though we welcome those who do). However, making the effort to put science information within the context of a story—What happened? When and where did it happen? To whom did it happen? And what are we to make of it? —will go a long way towards keeping the interest of the general reader. And with that interest comes the knowledge we all need to become better environmental citizens.

Reference

Wilson, E. O., ed., and B. Bilger, series ed. 2001. *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2001*. Houghton Mifflin, New York, 272 pp.

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Response to Article: Churches, Trees, and Environmental Perspectives

Thanks for publishing Nalini Nadkarni's article on churches, trees, and environmental perspectives in *Environmental Practice* 4(4). For a number of years, I have been involved in trying to reach out to the faith community concerning not only environmental/lifestyle issues, but also addressing the holiness of creation as a reflection of God, and it's good to see this type of outreach highlighted. I belong to what most would consider a fundamentalist denomination, but I find that it's not difficult to work within this context since anyone wanting to truly go "back to the Bible" can find all that is needed there in terms of caring for the earth and not following our American cultural "directives" to consume. Trees form the bookends of the Bible, from the tree of life in the garden in Genesis to the tree of life along the river of life in Revelation, and the mandate in Genesis 2:15 to tend the garden also ends somewhat frighteningly in Revelation 11 with the seventh angel declaring that "the time has come for destroying those who destroy the earth."

For those who wish to peruse the Web site, the Religious Campaign for Forest Conser-

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