

A Postcard World

The naturalist sees the wounds

Years ago, Australian Sen. Bob Brown was driving me to a speaking engagement when I spotted a wombat about 25 yards from the road. Wow. I had read books with wombat characters to my children. I loved the name "wombat," their teddy bear shape; and their slowness (they take 14 days to digest their food). Bob stopped the car as I exclaimed about how lucky I was to see one.



"Well, you're seeing one because it's got mange," Bob said. "They aren't usually out in the open on a sunny day. It's probably blind."

Uh-oh.

I remembered that moment as I listened last week to a radio interview with Alun Anderson, author of *After the Ice: Life, Death, and Geopolitics in the New Arctic*. He was visiting the Arctic for the first time when he saw a polar bear walking along the ice. He recalled thinking how confident the bear looked as it ignored the ship and concentrated on its travels; how comfortable it was in its world of ice; how much larger and longer it was than he had imagined.

Just then a naturalist on the ship walked up to him saying that the bear was starving; that she'd never make it through the winter, because the summer ice didn't extend far out enough to sea for her to catch seals.

Through his binoculars now, Alun could see how the bear's skin was sagging. He was about to learn that scientists agree that Arctic summer ice (and the polar bear on that ice) inevitably will be gone by the end of the century, if not by 2050. (The polar bear may eventually hybridize with the land-bound brown bear from which it once evolved.)

Another memory was jogged. I was sitting on the floor of a large room one evening years ago, enjoying a music group after a long day of meetings on pesticides. The music was a relief. A nearby tall poster prepared by Patagonia showed a black-and-white photograph of a young, fluffy inland shorebird from the cotton-growing central valley of California. I stared at the photo, again taking relief from the day's meeting. But I suddenly realized why that shorebird was in that poster. Among its baby fluffiness, it had no eyes. That's one of the wildlife birth defects that can be caused by certain pesticides. That one small shorebird is burned into my memory.

Over the years a Forest Service hydrologist in Eastern Oregon has bought picture postcards as she travels through the West. The postcards she chooses are those of idyllic streambank scenes. Their most common feature is a large, old riparian tree (for instance, a cottonwood) and an open, green, grassy slope down to the water. It makes you want to take a nap or a book or a fishing pole there. Their other common feature is that these idyllic scenes are of highly damaged streams. The grassy slopes are open because young cottonwood now have trouble rooting above the incised stream or sprouting amid a dense lawn of Kentucky bluegrass or other exotic grass.

A healthy riparian area, truth be told, is generally heck to try to travel through: tangled thickets of all size willows and trees and downed wood; soggy meadows; branches that grab your hat or your hair or poke you in the face. The birds and the bees love it, though.

Ecological knowledge can be disheartening. As wildlife and lands conservation researcher and writer Aldo Leopold wrote in *A Sand County Almanac*:

One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.

No one wants to listen to a voice calling from a world of wounds. Anyone agreeing to help must bring hope along with the bad news; a way forward along with a report of dire consequences of past choices; a motivation to care that is larger than the motivation to deny. Daunting. Essential.

Mary O'Brien has worked as a public interest scientist since 1981. She is currently dividing her time between Eugene and Castle Valley, Utah.

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

KILLER DOGS

As a dog lover who has had companion dogs for the last 25 years, I am thrilled that the pit bulls in the Jan. 6 *EW* found good homes. As a pedestrian and parent, I'm terrified.

On two occasions in the last several years, I've been threatened by pit bulls in my suburban driveway. The first time, a guest of a neighbor let his dog out of his car and the dog decided that my driveway was its territory. The second, two pit bulls were on an early morning journey of exploration through my neighborhood. In both cases, thanks to a small bit of knowledge about dog behavior, I was able to safely retreat from the threat. My child would probably not have been as fortunate. The majority of dog attacks are perpetrated by pit bulls, and many children have been mauled and killed by this breed of dog.

Victims of serious dog attacks often suffer acute damage, which may require \$250,000 to \$1 million in specialized medical care. Reconstructive surgery, such as skin grafting, tissue expansion and scar diminishment, often requires multiple procedures over a period of years. As the dog owner, are you prepared to help pay these expenses? Loving and providing for them is wonderful, but before you consider getting one of these dogs, please ask yourself if you are capable of controlling the animal 100 percent of the time. Anything less, even 99.999 percent control, can be devastating (source www.dogsbite.org).

Steven Shapiro
Eugene

ATTACKED BY PITS

There are two sides to all stories, and your recent cover story (1/6) about pit bulls certainly portrays the breed in a different light than I have witnessed. Please ask yourself why this breed of dog has been outlawed in certain jurisdictions. Please ask my dead pet llama and rough-castrated other llama if they see the breed as your article portrays. They were attacked by pit bulls in the early morning while they slept.

There certainly are other breeds who will meet your readers' need for companions without putting others at risk. I trust that lady expecting a child whom you interviewed will be careful with her newborn around her pit bull.

Fred Hamlin
Eugene

HATE SPEECH

Last year, Nevada Senate candidate Sharon Angle suggested "Second Amendment solutions" to the political situation. Sarah Palin put a map on her website showing rifle-scope cross-hairs to indicate Congress members she wanted to unseat (I don't buy her lame excuse that they were just a graphic). An insane follower of Glen Beck was stopped in California before he could murder people working for the Tides Foundation. This week, the Republicans and their PR outlet, Fox News, are spinning madly to deflect blame for the tragic events in Arizona this weekend.

The left is being accused of "politicizing" the discussion. Well it should be. I heard one pundit over the weekend say that "both sides need to tone down their rhetoric." That's wrong. During eight years of the Bush administration, no credible spokesman for the left advocated violence. In the last two years, you could fill a book with examples of disrespect, bigotry and incitement from a broad spectrum of politicians and media personalities on the right.

Now that a "Second Amendment solution" has been tried, we see the Republicans scrambling to repudiate their hate speech. I won't accept that. I believe they share responsibility for what happened, but they lack the courage and the moral conviction to admit it.

Brook Adams
Eugene

BRAINLESS BAKE SALE

To the Oregon Department of Forestry: The idea to consolidate and organize a better budget program for our school system is valid and years overdue. The