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Waterman Fund Essay Winner

Immersion

Learning to share for the sake of everything we love

Shane Behler



IT STARTED AS HIKES DO, SLOW AND LUMBERING, STRAPS CHAFING shoulders, the pack's weight threatening to wrench me down from behind, then acclimating as the miles passed, hitting my stride, the pack no longer bothersome, feeling like it had always been there. Finally, cruising into camp tired and happy under lengthening shadows.

We cleared the spruces soon after we started the next morning. My first time above the treeline, and we experienced a rarity: a clear day in New Hampshire's Presidential Range. The morning light reflected softly on the bald peaks, warm on my face. We stepped carefully around tiny wildflowers, and when our guide said that some of the species were found nowhere else in the world, I told him that this was the most beautiful place I'd ever been.

My awe vanished at the summit. A road runs up the other side of Mount Washington. Anyone can make it to the top. We made it around lunchtime, nearly 24 hours after leaving the Great Gulf Wilderness trailhead, and we were the only ones wearing backpacks. A hundred or so other people who had "summitted" had made it up in less than an hour under no power of their own. The visitor center served food. People were walking around eating French fries.

The morning light had been replaced by a glare. The view stretched far, but I wanted to go back over the lip of the ridge we had just crested, to the wilderness where engines don't idle and the air smells of spruce and rock, not frying oil.

Years passed, and my Mount Washington disappointment continued to sour. It spilled over experiences like a tipped glass of curdled milk. I became convinced that the outdoors should not be shared with those who lacked the appropriate appreciation. This belief lodged at the core of my being, coloring my perceptions and confirming my biases.

It would take just a moment to change my conviction.

CHANGE SPURS REFLECTION. AND THE MORE I REFLECTED, THE FURTHER back I went until I arrived at the beginning of it all: Home, a small town an hour north of New York City. An artificial oasis.

By the time I was born, the surrounding towns had been consumed by suburbia (cookie-cutter homes, soccer fields, Whole Foods). Much of the county had been used to produce milk for the city back before the advent

The place where a major change in attitude was spawned: the water at DuPont State Forest in North Carolina. CCALVIN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/CC BY-SA 3.0

of refrigeration technology. Now, most of the milk comes from Wisconsin, even California. Highways and commuter rails were built leading out of the city, and the ensuing urban diaspora displaced the farms. It turns out many people, if you give them the chance, want grass under their feet and a little room to breathe.

This flight to nature trampled it. Outside of a few parks and preserves, islands amid an ocean of fescue and asphalt, the wild is gone. But not in my hometown.

Decades ago, the town board anticipated what came to be. As the rural character faded from the towns closer to the city, the board zoned most of the town as “rural residential,” barring intensive development. In effect, subdivisions and strip malls were outlawed.

The towns around us grew and developed. The only thing that changed in my town was the exchange of dairy farms for horse farms (being so close to New York City, the land is more valuable as playgrounds for the wealthy than as working farms). Woodlots and hayfields still spread across the rolling hills, the barns are expensive and refurbished, and even some dirt roads remain. People wearing riding boots and tweed jackets step out of sports cars, not tractors, at the one coffee shop in town. I’ve been passed by Lamborghinis while walking the dirt roads with my dog.

There was a lake within walking distance from my home. Growing up, I had a kayak and time and learned where largemouth bass and wood ducks like to hide. I hiked everywhere with my dog, on and off trails, where we were supposed to go and where we weren’t, and found fox dens and beaver swamps and whitetail bucks with chandelier antlers. My town is the only one left in the county with a breeding population of bobolinks. I’d walk through May hayfields under their scissored flight, wondering what they had seen in Argentina, wondering how little birds could fly so far.

They’re still coming back.

This truce between bucolic charm and the wealth that enabled it allowed for a childhood spent outdoors. It took me a while to realize this, but I had opportunities that kids who grew up even a few miles away couldn’t fathom.

By the time I was fifteen, the age I had climbed Mount Washington, I probably had spent more solitary time in nature than most people will in their lifetime. Which is how I became such a young curmudgeon: I bristled when people played music too loud on a trail, when water-skiers shredded serene mornings in the kayak, at long chairlift lines that ended in skied-over powder caches. I went to Yellowstone National Park expecting an untamed landscape

spared from human hands, a wilderness in the rawest, purest, most seismic sense of the word. Instead, I found traffic jams, boardwalks thronged with tourists clutching selfie sticks, and campgrounds that smelled of diesel fuel.

People tarnished, marred, and ruined the sanctity of the outdoors. Nature, my upbringing had allowed me to believe, could and should only be experienced and appreciated in solitude or with select, equally reverent company. Passing a few too many folks on a hike or having one too many drift boats float by me while wading a river, and the day—the whole experience—was tainted. Nature was (and is) my escape from everything, and crowds reminded me of everything I set out to leave behind. The restfulness and rejuvenation I seek in the woods, mountains, and rivers could not be found in the company of strangers.

MY EPIPHANY WENT LIKE THIS: I WAS IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA, WHERE the Appalachian Mountains make their southern stand of grandeur, and I had a Saturday to kill. So I drove to Dupont State Forest, a sprawling tract of public land I had never visited, to fly-fish a river I had never seen. The river, I had read in a guidebook, lost hundreds of feet in elevation in the forest as it cascaded through a series of waterfalls. Tempting enough.

The drive to the forest was pretty and winding. It was April, and new greenery unfurled along the roadside. The air was just warm enough to roll down the windows and wash in the spring. Between the anticipation and the greening mountains, I had plenty to smile about.

My expectations crumbled when I pulled into the parking lot. The first problem was that there *was* a parking lot. Even worse, it was filled with cars. Hundreds of them. Kids darted between the rows, followed by parents stuffing sandwiches and juice boxes into backpacks. People were lounging on tailgates, listening to music, smoking cigarettes. Tire-churned dust hung in the air.

I found a spot near the back, parked and stepped out, and since I had made the trip, I resigned myself to give it a whirl despite the crowd.

A footbridge spanned the river, and I funneled over it along with everyone else. Below, golden retrievers and labradoodles splashed after tennis balls thrown by their owners. The bridge led to a gravel trail running up the riverbank, and I am not exaggerating when I say I've walked city sidewalks less crowded. The only person wearing waders and carrying a fly rod, I brushed off several "Are you catching anything?" comments before dropping off the trail and stepping into the water.



Shane Behler fishing on the Madison River in Montana. COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Focus on the fishing, I told myself. Watch the water slip toward the ocean. Read the river's intricate patterns. See the silver flash on the sunlit bottom, feel the rod jump. Block out the people streaming past. Don't hear the kids scream. Ignore the commotion, the noise, the regrettable distractions. An impossible task.

Bitterly, I fished my way up to the base of one of the waterfalls. The few trout I had caught were thin salvation, and my head was buried in my fly box pondering my narrow options when two young kids and their parents came

up the trail behind me. The kids squealed with excitement at the sight of their first waterfall and ran down to the river while their parents apologized for interrupting my fishing. I looked up, startled, and mumbled something about it being OK as the kids descended on the river to play. Within seconds, they were at my feet rolling over stones and grabbing after crayfish, throwing rocks and laughing and splashing and watching the water come crashing down. Suddenly, unexpectedly, I was reminded of myself twenty years before, when all the wonder in the world could be found under an upturned rock, along a brook trout's vermiculated spine, drifting on crystal currents, and in all that remained unknown, waiting to be discovered.

I stepped back, watching them, trying to see the river and waterfall as they did. My smile returned; then I turned downstream, climbed up the bank, and walked back to my car.

I sat on my tailgate and looked around as I ate a sandwich. The parking lot was even busier, with more cars and more people. Yet I felt no disappointment. No disgust. Rather, happiness again and, even better, hope. All these people took a day trip into the mountains to see some waterfalls. Isn't that a beautiful thing?

I finished my sandwich and lingered on the tailgate. People were driving in slow, prowling circles, looking for an open spot. It was time to make room for another. I closed the trunk, started my car, and drove away with plenty to think about on the ride home.

What I've always sought in nature—purity in spirit, refreshing solitude, that vague sense of wildness and all it does to us—are increasingly scarce commodities. Economics teaches that when supply falls, prices will rise. As prices rise, supply—in this case access and availability—continues to fall. Fewer and fewer people will have a childhood like mine. If those parents hadn't brought their kids to the waterfall, could they ever love the river? What if the waterfall becomes their morning on their kayak, their rambling hike with their favorite dog? What if the waterfall becomes their bobolinks?

A mirror had been held up to my privileged view of nature. The reflection was sharp, critical: I am one of the lucky few. I think about my hometown and my childhood. Most of the kids in my high school had parents who supported them, loved them, opened the right doors for them. Just as mine had done for me—a yard, a garden, a bird feeder, summer camp in New Hampshire, trips to national parks. The nature I was surrounded with while young, the nature I had taken for granted, existed on the tax dollars of those who could afford the price of admission. To lean on economics again, in

my hometown, nature is a luxury good. And most people can't have luxury goods. They would no longer be a luxury.

If it is to survive, nature cannot be a luxury. Wilderness cannot be a luxury. Pictures, videos, even words pale in comparison to the senses—to immersion. Appreciation needs immersion. Love needs immersion.

More people need to visit Yellowstone. More people need to summit Mount Washington, no matter how they get to the top. More people need to take naps on sandy river bends, stand among northwoods spruces, marvel at unpolluted starlight. If they don't, they will not care about any of it. Rare wildflowers and so much more will be stepped over, unnoticed, then lost.

In a world where compassion and understanding are increasingly uncommon, care, appreciation, love—these must be fostered.

There's another waterfall in North Carolina. There's no parking lot near its base, no gravel trail along the riverbank. Water crashes to an audience of poplars and rhododendrons. I found this waterfall by accident, fishing up the river for the surrounding wild as much as I was for its trout, when I came around a bend and there it was.

I still prefer to be alone outdoors and probably always will. I've never seen another soul at this waterfall, and a large part of me hopes I never do. But if one day I round the bend and someone is standing there, watching the falls, I will not be disappointed. I'll share a smile with them and ask what they think about the sunlight passing through the poplars, the mosses and ferns growing on the mist-soaked granite, the gin-clear water that has carved the mountain since time immemorial.

SHANE BEHLER is from New York State and now lives in Washington, D.C., where he works on conservation policy. He holds a bachelor's degree in environmental science and a master's degree in applied economics from Clemson University. He spends as much time outside as he possibly can.

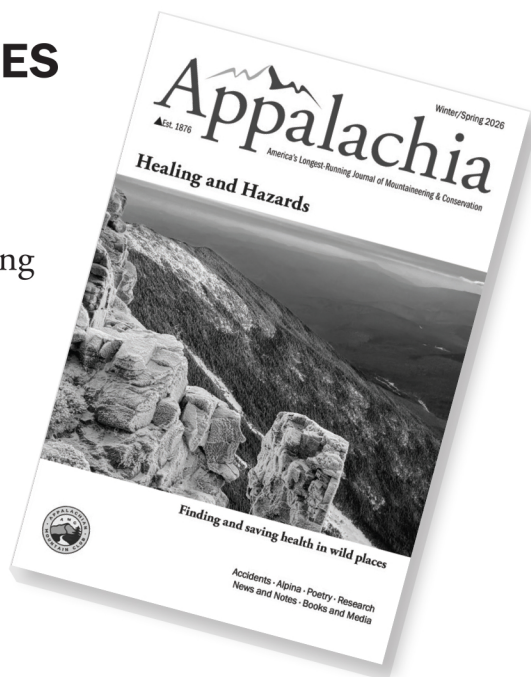
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