

{VIEWPOINTS}

# Natural History and the Spiral of Offering



BY THOMAS LOWE FLEISCHNER

**N**ATURAL HISTORY—a practice of intentional, focused attentiveness and receptivity to the more-than-human world,<sup>1</sup> guided by honesty and accuracy—is one of the oldest continuous human traditions. Simply put, there have never been people without natural history. Through the long millennia of paleolithic times people engaged in this oldest pattern of paying attention because their lives depended on it. Where particular food plants grew and when they reached the proper stage for harvest; when the migration of food animals could be expected to pass through which corner of the home terrain; source locales for tools (dogbane for cordage, chert for arrowheads): all would be known, and must be known. This pragmatic knowledge led to seeing more subtle relationships; a hunter, for example, might come to recognize a correlation between a particular blue of the sky and hunting success to come.

Natural history represents a search for patterns. It is an untidy process, a constant oscillating between landscape-scale views and minute biological details, and also between seeing what is right in front of us and conjecturing about what might be missing or otherwise unseeable. A naturalist weaves insight gleaned from direct experience with the gift of lore handed down in books and journals by predecessors. Reading a landscape involves three interrelated activities: actively observing, asking questions, and interpreting. Observation, questioning, and interpretation interpenetrate to become one life project—trying to learn from, and understand, this world.<sup>2</sup>

As humans became agricultural (interestingly enough, at roughly the same time in both the old and new worlds—a little over 10,000 years ago), different phenomena gained significance and so natural history attention focused on different subjects. By and large, this meant a narrowing of the field of view as people gained greater control over their livelihoods. Farmers discovered natural history nuances of a few species, but began to ignore many more. Attention was focused on smaller slices of biodiversity and geography. Agriculture allowed—indeed required—people to gather together into larger, more sedentary communities that saved more stuff: seeds, tools, bounty from the earth and trade. Communities grew into societies, with social hierarchies and specialization of labor. As millennia passed, these societies grew ever more specialized, and natural history—which was fundamental for hunting and gathering peoples—gradually diminished as the foundation for daily life.

NATURAL HISTORY IS THE PARENT OF SEVERAL MODERN sciences: ecology, anthropology, geology, and paleontology.<sup>3</sup> In addition to being the root of natural science, it can be seen more broadly as the root of psychology, with its careful attentiveness to the relationship between inner and outer worlds. (In conversation the other day a psychologist friend concurred: “psychology is just another branch of natural history.”) Literature, too, stems from such attentiveness. As Jane Hirshfield has pointed out, poetry “begins...in the body and mind of concentration...a particular state of awareness: penetrating, unified, and focused, yet also permeable and open.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, meditation and other reflective spiritual practices derive from a common tradition with natural history. Zazen and other meditative disciplines offer practice at attentiveness, sometimes called mindfulness.<sup>5</sup>

I suggest that there are several qualities embodied in the successful practice of natural history:

- 1) *Attentiveness*. According to the poet John Haines, “passionate attention to the world—an attention to which the least detail has its instructive significance—is perhaps the most telling and important trait in our inheritance. Without it there is no art, no love, no possibility of domestic or political harmony. On it alone may rest our prospects for the future.”<sup>6</sup>
- 2) *Receptivity*.
- 3) *Expression*. That which is received is interpreted and given back to the community.
- 4) *Vision*. One task of naturalists, whether literary naturalists or research ecologists, is “to see the unseen.”<sup>7</sup> What species is no longer here? What did this place look like in the Pleistocene? What will it look like next month? What could it look like if people lived to their potential?
- 5) *Accuracy*. Honesty and accuracy are hallmarks of natural history. Charles Darwin declared that “the soul of natural history is accuracy.” To see what is really there, rather than what we think is there, keeps us from projecting the image of our own consciousness onto the rest of the world—which leads to...
- 6) *Humility*.
- 7) *Affirmation*. We who engage with the more-than-human world regularly tend to find hope more routinely than those who dwell in a house built of human mirrors.
- 8) *Gratitude*.

The concept of gratitude leads back to my title. What is meant by “the spiral of offering”? The Oxford English

Dictionary tells us that *offering* denotes "something offered in tribute or as a token of esteem; something presented to a deity in devotion." What sense, then, can we make of natural history as a form of offering?

We naturalists—scientists and activists, professionals and amateurs—undertake the practice of natural history in tribute to the world, as a token of esteem for the world, in gratitude for the gift of living in a world that is inestimably more diverse and gorgeous than it might have been. All natural history is informed and motivated at some level by this sense of gratitude and awe.

When we pay respectful attention to the living world, thus getting to know it, the world is served in the pragmatic and limited world of human politics—for a known and loved world has more effective advocates than one that's ignored. Terry Tempest Williams has referred to a naturalist's practice as one of service. She adds, "if you are in the service of something, you are receptive, open, you are a student."<sup>8</sup> One group of naturalists declared that "the study of natural history is the first step in repaying our debt to the earth."<sup>9</sup> One of the forms this offering can take is overtly political. Gary Nabhan has referred to naturalists as "the antibodies of our society." They bolster our immunity to "the ills and indulgences of our own culture and species," guarding against ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism. Without naturalists, he concludes, "our society would be incapable of reading the signs that we have irreparably damaged our life-support system."<sup>10</sup>

But what makes natural-history-as-devotion particularly compelling is that the offering moves in both directions. We not only offer, but receive.

I have a close friend who is a fiction writer, not a naturalist. In her work, close observation and attentiveness has been reserved for human stories. A year ago, though, she went through the heart-rending experience of watching her father die as she sat by his side. Since his death, she told me recently, she feels closer to all living things. Natural history is something that has been offered up to her. It was always there, she realizes now, but before this emotional searing, she told me, she "just wasn't aware, just wasn't open to the wonder." Since then she has spent dozens of hours in her backyard tracking the growth of a family of whiptail lizards. At an island retreat her attention was drawn to a pair of nesting wrens more than to the waves on the beach. Until recently she wouldn't have paid heed to the drab little birds, nor bothered to identify them. But in her heightened state of awareness, the tiny motions of the two birds transfixed her so completely that she

cried when she had to leave their company. This attention to the more-than-human world has buoyed her up, that she might feel her very real human sadness in a fuller context, feel her father's death embedded within a network of births and living. As another friend put it, "sometimes the voices inside drown out the voices outside." Natural history keeps us listening to the voices outside, and they often provide context and perspective on our own internal concerns.

Each spring I teach an intensive field natural history course; the past two years I asked students on the final day to reflect on what natural history had given them. Their responses have included such things as: *what it means to be patient; how to open my mind; how to trust myself; a reawakening of my senses; a sense of the larger-than-life slow movement of time.* Natural history, said one, is "a way of cultivating awareness." Note that these offerings from the world to the naturalist comprise some of the goals of other, more human-centered quests. Think of the therapist bills that could be saved by more natural history study! Much of the self-help bookshelf could be replaced by direct consultation with the larger ecological self of the outer world.

And so we offer gratitude and attentiveness to the world, and the world rewards this attentiveness with an awareness of its grace that opens us to all sorts of gifts. But natural history has never involved just passively taking *in*: rather, a naturalist, whether an etcher on a stone wall or a watercolorist, a storyteller around a tribal fire or a research scientist, attempts to make sense of what she or he has witnessed, and to translate it for others to understand. This role for natural historians as communicators is another turn in the spiral of offering: naturalist paying close attention to the world, feeling gratitude for glimpses of transparency between self and non-self; Nature offering peace and insight back; and naturalist offering translations back to human community. As the word "history" implies, natural history involves telling stories. These stories are refracted through different prisms—science, art, literature—but in all cases, the belief is that these stories are worthy teachers. As Badger reminds us, in Barry Lopez's fable *Crow and Weasel*, "sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive."<sup>11</sup>

As human beings concerned with the future, and, particularly, with the fate of the Earth's biological diversity, it is our responsibility to reclaim allegiance with our ancient tradition of natural history, in its most expansive sense—including art, science, and the relationship between the two. Our society provides no formal system of devotion to the living, breathing world around us. The closest the status quo comes, perhaps, is graduate school. But few schools overtly honor the

tradition of natural history, and fewer still would be comfortable with the notion that their acolytes were there to consecrate their sense of devotion to a higher power. But to be a naturalist you needn't have fancy letters after your name. In fact, hope for the future of the world will increase in direct proportion to the percentage of regular folks who practice natural history—the oldest form of human attentiveness, requiring the skill and humility to examine something larger than ourselves. The offering back and forth between Earth and naturalist spirals on, in an ever-deepening relationship. ☾

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**Thomas Lowe Fleischner**, a naturalist and conservation biologist, is the author of *Singing Stone: A Natural History of the Escalante Canyons and numerous articles*. He teaches in the Environmental Studies Program at Prescott College (Prescott College, 220 Grove Avenue, Prescott, AZ 86301; [tfleischner@prescott.edu](mailto:tfleischner@prescott.edu)).

#### NOTES

1. This useful term comes from David Abram, 1996, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon).
2. See Thomas Lowe Fleischner, 1999, *Singing Stone: A Natural History of the Escalante Canyons* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press), 40, 70.
3. For a more thorough recounting of the history of natural history, see Thomas L. Fleischner, 1999, Revitalizing natural history, *Wild Earth* 9(2): 81–89.
4. Jane Hirshfield, 1997, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* (New York: HarperCollins), 3.
5. See, for example, Robert Aitken, 1982, *Taking the Path of Zen* (San Francisco: North Point Press); Jack Kornfield, 1993, *A Path with Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life* (New York: Bantam); and Thich Nhat Hanh, 1976, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Boston: Beacon Press).
6. Comments on the dust jacket of Thomas J. Lyon, ed., 1989, *This Incomparable Land: A Book of American Nature Writing* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin).
7. The notion of "seeing the unseen" has been put forth by literary scholars such as John Tallmadge, 1997, in *Meeting the Tree of Life: A Teacher's Path* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press), 190–191, and research ecologists Chris Maser and James M. Trappe, 1984, who titled a government monograph "The seen and unseen world of the fallen tree" (General Technical Report PNW-164, Portland, Oregon: Pacific Northwest Forest and Range Experiment Station, USDA-Forest Service).
8. Edward Lueders, ed., 1989, *Writing Natural History: Dialogues with Authors* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press), 62.
9. Rita M. O'Clair, Robert H. Armstrong, and Richard Carstensen, 1997, *The Nature of Southeast Alaska: A Guide to Plants, Animals, and Habitats, Second Edition*. (Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Books), 8.
10. Gary Paul Nabhan, 1993, Introduction: Diversity in desert wildlife writing, in *Counting Sheep: Twenty Ways of Seeing Desert Bighorn*, ed. G. P. Nabhan (Tucson: University of Arizona Press), xvi.
11. Barry Lopez, 1990, *Crow and Weasel* (San Francisco: North Point Press), 48.