

Big Bad Wolf

Man's absurd war against nature.

By the early 20th century, Germany was proud to proclaim that it had destroyed every living wolf within its borders, thus ridding the country of the evil antagonist of Little Red Riding Hood and so many other of its Grimm fairy tales. Human horror at "nature red in tooth and claw" had divided the natural world into moral categories of good and evil: innocent deer, malevolent wolves. What could be more rational than the destruction of everything defined as evil? And what followed more readily than the Nazi death camps?

Nature is natural. The moral judgments we impose on it are projections of the human mind. We forget that we humans are part of nature, subject to the same natural process of birth, growth, struggle, decay and death, and driven by the same instinctual forces to survive. Civilization is a thin veneer often leading more to self-deception than consciousness. In the Western world, the idea that man can and should control nature derives from a certain interpretation of the Bible: "And God said unto them: have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." This anthropocentric message suggests that nature is entirely for our use, even our amusement. We have a right to cage the wild animals.

"Something tells me it's all happening at the zoo," mourned Simon and Garfunkel in the '60s, seeing in the captive animals something of our own caged nature. Subsequent efforts to ban the bars at zoos resulted in more naturalistic enclosures. Peter Karsten, long-time director of the Calgary Zoo, was at the vanguard of the movement. (See "The Zookeeper," p. 38.) He is rightfully admired for his dedication to the welfare of the animals. But a cageless zoo is merely a more convincing

simulacrum, and not a true encounter with wildness.

Canada has always been seen as a country of vast wilderness. As soon as the railway made it possible, jaded Europeans seeking a sublime experience travelled in droves to Banff, which became the first national park created by the federal government to protect and preserve wilderness. The motives for the protection of wilderness were mixed (tourism is lucrative), but a few people valued wilderness for itself alone, not for any use to which man can put it. Alberta has declared certain areas of the province to be "Special Places" like Banff, and the Castle Crown is one of them. However, do we have any true respect for wilderness? We push seismic lines through these areas, clear-cut forests, allow access by all-terrain vehicles and snowmobiles and generally destroy anything that makes these areas special. (See "Wild Alberta's Last Stand," p. 26.)

Our human needs require us to take from nature, of course, but there are limits to how much we can take, how much we can destroy. Certainly the Aboriginal people killed buffalo to survive, but they took only as many as they needed, used every part and had a grateful and reverent attitude toward the beast. The relationship was sustainable until the white man arrived. Can we learn anything from that model to apply to the exploitation of the oil sands in Fort McMurray? Ironically, the collapse of the global economy and the slowing of growth may yet be good for the place. (See "Out of the Wild," p. 32.)

Civilization has its discontents, as Freud so famously observed. The repression and denial of our nature keeps us unaware of our own basic motivations, our own wild nature. It is our own greed that should concern us, our own cruelty, our own thoughtlessness, our own impulse to destroy whatever we fear. The big bad wolf is in ourselves.



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