

Man, Woman, and Nature, Now

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During the third week of this past May, something original took shape in the shortgrass steppe east of Fort Collins, Colorado. Yes, a funnel cloud that could have crafted itself into a tornado did form during the week, darkening the whole Western sky. However, the other momentous event of the week involved the gathering of 30 undergraduate students ranging from California to New Hampshire, brought together to the steppe. They came not only to learn about the ecology and relationships of the landscape surrounding them, but also to learn about each other and about implementing holistic scientific and policy practices towards sustainability issues of the future.

From the smallest of entities in the pine bark beetle killing off acre upon acre of coniferous forests to the systemically complex realm of global climate change, no issue was ignored. Arguably most key of all, this gathering, the 2010 Summer Academy of the Rocky Mountain Science & Sustainability Network (RMSSN) represented a new path to grow in new modes of environmental leadership and ecosystem awareness. With a January 2010 grant from the National Science Foundation to further bolster the mission of the RMSSN, the Summer Academy out on the Colorado steppe could come to full fruition. Ultimately, we are at the threshold of bridging humans and nature now with exciting possibilities in the months and years to come, cultivating relationships in a human ecosystem all its own that will feed into the one unifying ecosystem all around us: Earth.

One of the powers of the Rocky Mountain Science & Sustainability Network visible in the moments of brainstorming sessions, field trips, or dance parties during the third week of May on the Colorado range-lands continues to grow on me here in the rolling green mountains and vibrant verdancy of Vermont. In no small way of group dynamics and interconnectedness, RMSSN weeks later and thousands of miles away still stands out as an ecosystem all its own. I imagine that even alluding to each individual's niche (NT, NF and various other temperaments fused with differing personalities), interrelationships across these niches, and even our own distinctive and now global biomes, this whole notion slowly coalesces.

With members working from Oregon forests to New Hampshire cities to Latin American islands this summer, RMSSN presents all of us in the community a timely yet timeless challenge. Yes, a challenge that even I working in such a diverse, partnership-driven, and community-focused place as Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park (MBRNHP) in Woodstock, Vermont am facing. Ultimately, how can we bridge different stakeholders, different values systems together in such a way to not just bolster eco-literacy, but to synthesize elements of organic leadership and environmental stewardship in the myriad communities we are working within? If I may, I'd like to pose a thought experiment from a book I found in the depths of a research library at MBRNHP a few days ago and tying back to how RMSSN just might fit in.

Envision a country where erratic weather patterns induced by climate change alter sleepily flowing rivers into sheer conduits of silt-laced water, carrying away soil and people alike. Envision a country where political factions and corporate conglomerates find themselves in a perpetual tug-of-war over their responsibilities to saving and restoring the health of their communities. Envision a country where the populace is divided over the future direction of the country's livelihoods. Welcome to the United States...in 1847. Intriguing how some things never change, whatever temporal landscapes our ecosystems are in.

George Perkins Marsh, author of *Man and Nature* (arguable America's first conservation book) and one of the founding figures at MBRNHP, witnessed all the above trends. From hillside floods coming off of clear-cut ranges in Vermont to the federal government's role in homesteading on the ever burgeoning frontier to growing dissension on how to extract or preserve tracts of land for future generations, Marsh worried. Yet, he transformed his initial worries even before writing *Man and Nature* in 1864 into incisive speeches given before crowd of hundreds, if not thousands, of people. In 1847, Marsh delivered these lines to a Cambridge, Massachusetts Phi Beta Kappa society:

"We need not be recluses devoted to quiet literary research, but rather live and act in the busy whirl of the great world, share the anxieties and the hazards of commerce, the toils and the rivalries of the learned professions, or the fierce strife of contending politi-

cal factions...to then be refreshed by the voice of the Muses.”^[1]

A call to action by a man of action. Yet, reading through these lines, I wondered over what Marsh could have alluded to by “the voice of the Muses.” Then, over the last couple of days, corresponding with fellow RMSSN members, the members themselves became the muses, their stories & voices of adapting to different environments and starting to connect to their summer communities. Individually, our abilities to inspire and drive ourselves and others in our leadership missions, Muse-like, manifested in a variety of ways. Some of our colleagues spoke with conviction on climate change science, challenging us to build confidence in our voices for sustainability. Other colleagues knew how best to lay out transects for wildlife surveys, engaging some of us with not so analytical minds to be more deliberate, calculating, sharp in our thinking.

Yet, the most tangible example of ecological Musing in action came during our last full day of team-building dynamics at Pingree Park, at the foot of snow-laced Comanche Peak. One of our colleagues, Eric from Mexico, came reluctantly at first to the high ropes course, with climbing walls and other wooden structures rising story after story from the ground below. However over the course of the sunny, gusty May afternoon, even Eric ascended to the “Leap of Faith,” where one essentially climbs a +30-40 foot telephone pole— only to jump no less than ten feet across open air to grasp onto a metal bar suspended in very trapeze-artist fashion. Granted, harnesses, helmets, and nylon ropes are involved, yet even such equipment never fully compensates the need for trust, for self-confidence, for a leap of faith to reach that bar.

Eric proved no exception, and for almost an hour, he stood anxiously

on top of the telephone pole. Meanwhile, many of us broke away from the other rope challenges and began cheering him on in English and Spanish. Collective, rallying trust to hopefully inspire Eric to build in himself his own self-confidence, in those operating the “leap,” in all of us, and in his own niche of the moment to jump. Eventually, Eric jumped...and not only jumped, but grasped onto the bar. As one Zen quotes reads, leap and the net will appear— mentally and psychologically, if not physically. Whether or not Eric would have jumped of his own volition without all of us encouraging him on is debatable, but the reciprocity of us hopefully realizing his potential and niche to jump also inspired us, in our own potential and niches in conservation leadership in the future, whatever challenges arise. Leap and the net will appear.

This appears to be the beauty of RMSSN as a sustainable ecosystem with all of its niches the globe over—the ability to continue to evolve, morph, and build upon confidently what is arguably the most solid, human-based homeostasis I’ve seen anywhere. In nature, homeostasis seeks nothing less than “regulation of an internal environment and always working towards a stable, constant condition.”^[2] Granted, such homeostasis is also built upon illuminating moments of dynamism, however brief or prolonged they may be. Furthermore, such homeostasis in dynamic niches can be realized through recognizing and building relationships with muses all around us, be they fellow friends & colleagues, birds flying and feeding in the Colorado Rockies, or in the ecosystems of the Colorado Rockies themselves and beyond.

To highlight such homeostasis weaving in times of dynamism, here’s some of my summer agenda in Vermont. At MBRNHP, I’ll be juggling tasks ranging from teach-

ing environmental education to Woodstock high school students through a newfound Use-Intake program, drafting and creating new website articles and pages for outreach for the park to the rest of the cyber-world, and even getting down and dirty in community gardens with the Ottauquechee Community Partnership, amongst other day-to-day possibilities. Here, dynamic agendas work within the homeostatic whole of connecting communities to realize their full leadership, stewardship, and organic potential. Furthermore, to have a network like RMSSN for critiques, for support, or for just welcome perspective during especially longer days reinforces ecosystem themes working and living this summer and beyond. To take the lessons from Marsh, Man and Nature, and RMSSN, I’d like to take one quote to meditate on from Vermont nature writer, John Elder, who wrote about a local landmark, Mount Tom, immediately before the park’s inception. He wrote:

“We must conceive of stewardship not simply as one individual’s practice, but rather as the mutual and intimate relationship extending across generations, between a human community and its place on earth.”^[3]

Wherever we are, with RMSSN all around us, let us conceive and build such a place.

References

- [1] Marsh, George Perkins. *Man and Nature, Or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*. David Lowenthal, ed. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press (Original Publication, 1864, 1st Harvard Edition 1965, Sixth Printing 1995) xxvi.
- [2] Purves, William K., David Sadava, Gordon H. Orians, & H. Craig Heller. *Life: The Science of Biology*. Sinauer Associates Inc. & W.H. Freeman & Company (6th Edition, 2001) 5.
- [3] Elder, John. “Inheriting Mount Tom in Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park Guide. National Park Service & Library of Congress (Original Citation, 1997, Guide Edition, 2009) 5.