

Permanent Subsistence Zones

Seaweed

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Villages or free wanderers

If you read through this collection, you'll get the distinct impression that I am trying to guide rebels in a specific direction. But what is the destination of these paths I am urging us on?

There is general consensus that the first people to colonize the North American continent did so about 10 to 12000 years before the present. There are dissenting archaeologists who believe that humans have been here for closer to 20000 years or even more. Radio carbon dating indicates that humans were on the eastern half of the continent, in what is presently called the United States, at least 10,400 years ago. Their remains are found over the entire area. Meat seems to have been the primary food source and the peoples of the area used fluted projectile points as their basic hunting tool. These free wanderers, as some archaeologists have described them, were essentially single families or small bands of related kin.

What interests me is the fact that there is no physical evidence, to my knowledge, of human made shelters in this area for the first several thousand years of people living there. No seasonal campsites have been found, let alone permanent village sites, until around 8000 years ago. That means that humans on this continent wandered freely without permanent sites, and perhaps without even human made shelters, for at least 4000 years.

From 8000 until 3500 years ago, there is a gradual shift from this open wandering based lifeway, to a more sedentary one. In the beginning there emerge a number of temporary campsites, with some evidence of longevity of occupation. Toward the middle of this period, we find increasing numbers of seasonal campsites, places where the wanderers would regularly return to for certain foods. By the end of this period we find the midden deposits, designated village or family places where the waste products of meals and other debris from human activity were placed, many of them 10 meters deep. Human groups became slightly larger, they wandered less, had camps that occupied an acre or two. This is when we find circular pole-framed structures, ornaments, woven mats, storage pits, nets and traps. Humans slowly moved from their free wandering days to a more subsistence based life. They became embedded in specific areas, developed a set of skills and tools based on their environmental context. Essentially they became part of a place, both formed by and forming it.

The subsistence I imagine and believe we should strive toward is one that once found its expression somewhere between and within these two time periods. I don't view one time period as superior to the other against a measure of extent of domination or domestication. I don't agree with the model of history that draws a map of rectilinear roads going through time with village life located in a purgatory downhill from the heaven of free wandering and somewhere before the hell of urban life.

Were the free wanderers the most free? Were their people the happiest, the least alienated (or without alienation)? Were they even the wildest?

In some green anarchist and primitivist writing, re-wilding is the destination. And because any degree of sedentary living, even seasonal, is viewed as a degree of domestication, then only the free wandering lifeways seem to offer the ultimate fruit of wildness. For them, unless we are aiming toward small, self-organized bands of related kin roaming forests and seashores, then we won't ever be truly capable of rediscovering our wild existences, and thus our potential to realize ourselves as truly undomesticated beings in an unconstrained, direct relationship with every raw moment.

But I have come to the conclusion that a mutually shared set of life skills, combined with the extensive sensual knowledge that comes with being embedded in a place, also allows for the same unfettered existence that the free wanderers had.

To view human history on this continent as a simple linear devolution from the completely free, unmediated lives of the original inhabitants to the first degrees of separation in the campsites, then deeper still with the seasonal camps, then into the abyss of domestication in the semi-permanent and permanent villages to the complete colonization and integration into urban life under the empire of the market and hierarchy, is just too one-dimensional.

I am not aiming for relationships that always exclude any degree of sedentariness any more than I am aiming for an obligatory sedentariness.

I think that the villages that gave us the midden deposits and the traps and the nets and the masks and the songs etc., are as ideal an ultimate destination as the roaming days of the free wanderers.

Subsistence for me includes the lifeways of free wandering people as well as village/seasonal camp based people. Both seem to offer the richness of meaningful, ungoverned lives. Both seem to encourage our possible variations as free beings.

The village isn't a stage on a downhill momentum toward urban life. The net and song and mask aren't first steps on a path toward rank and privilege, environmental degradation or ever increasing degrees of mediated lives. They are merely the outcome of sensual wisdom, of embeddedness, of organic life ways. In this sense my destination is primarily toward small villages and seasonal camps.

Here, where I live, in the Comox Valley in the Pacific Northwest, herring season has come and gone once again. Many of us take special notice of this natural cycle, it seems truly wondrous: the water whitening from fish spawn, the seagulls excitedly squealing with anticipation and satisfaction, the deep bark of sea lions filling the air, keen eyed bald eagles swooping down from their tree top perches to gorge themselves. But there is a sinister player in this seasonal cycle. It's called the commercial fishing industry.

In the middle part of the eighteenth century, the western expansion of the European invaders involved the use of market hunting as opposed to a subsistence tactic. Combined with the development of breech loading firearms, this approach led to the extermination and near extinction of several species, including the pronghorn, elk, deer and some waterfowl. On the Great Plains, frozen pronghorn carcasses were stacked like cordwood along railway lines to be shipped east to urban centers. The elimination of the bison was part of a covert policy of the United States government to deprive the indigenous people of their subsistence base, and thereby their base of operation, against the army and settlers.

The same forces today are used to prevent any possibility of the dispossessed from regrouping and claiming territory within which to live according to principles of mutual aid and organically self-organized subsistence ways. Of course as the earth's natural abundance is plundered for the market, indigenous traditionalists also have less chance of living according to the old embedded ways. Take note that it was military policy to deprive the resisters of their food sources so that they would lose their base of operations. Doesn't that indicate that in order for rebels to begin having some success in terms of the social war that they too need to secure bases as they regroup and strategize on how to win a few battles?

Unless humans begin to live in accordance with ecological principles, that is, in harmony with our biosphere and with each other, ecological and social collapses appear inevitable. The signs are

everywhere: climate change on a global scale, empires aggressively pursuing imperial conquests, the populations of entire nations muted by fear of punishment and numbed by mood altering drugs, planetary domestication and plunder of wild nature, overflowing prisons, astronomical suicidal rates, cancer, extinction, hunger and private atomized existences. Name a civilization that wasn't fundamentally characterized by centralization, coercive authority, ecological plunder, imperialism and a general arrogance toward others. It's not just the state and capitalism that are to blame, because every civilization included classes and a state. We have to look at what it is about the cultural values and philosophical outlooks of the civilized (urban peoples), that lead them to disrespect life forms outside of their view and to tolerate oppressive, impersonal institutions as an inevitable part of everyday living.

But there are many examples of individuals, groups of friends and communities resisting the current and pursuing different paths. The ones that inspire me the most are the ones committed to firmly establishing themselves in a specific region. They want to (or continue to) hunt, fish, collect herbs and grow gardens together, share tools and child minding responsibilities, and help clothe and shelter one another using everything from permaculture techniques to re-appropriation. The focus of course must be on access to land that can potentially support these clans and groups which are based on voluntary association and mutual aid and self-sustenance. And as these sustenance zones are nurtured, a general and natural willingness to defend them naturally emerge. From South America to South Africa, from Chiapas to India we read and hear about communities that are not only trying to survive, but to create new societies based on anarchic insights. Using diverse tactics, these communities are determined to secede from the nation states that confine and dispossess them. This is where the herring fishery comes back into our focus.

Here in what is known as British Columbia, in the Coast Salish and Kwakiutl territories where the Gulf Islands are located, there has always been people who participated in the annual herring run who were not part of the commercial industry. Incidentally, while the group of islands are collectively known as the "Gulf Islands", they are located in a strait not a gulf. This is because a European explorer named them without traveling the full length of the waters in which they are located. In any case some are newcomers while others have been doing so for decades. They harvest the roe and net the fish along the shoreline or from boats. Typically the roe, or eggs from the females, is collected on hemlock or other evergreen boughs or kelp that is floated in the water until they are saturated. On many islands families and friends also collect the roe which washes onto the shore mixed in with the seaweed, for their families, and for their gardens, providing a rich source of minerals for their compost. All this is collected on a small scale, harvested without machines or wage slaves. Oftentimes the fish itself is harvested, not just the roe. Using different preservation techniques, like pickling, this bounty is stored for future use. Some use the herring as bait for other fish. As well, all along the west coast, indigenous peoples traditionally collected herring roe as a food source. All of this activity is and has been pursued on a scale commensurate with sustainability.

Empty Handed

But according to Dave Wiwchar, in a report published in the Nuu-chah-nulth Southern Region Reporter, "...over the last few years, First Nations (indigenous) fishers who drop hemlock trees or kelp bundles in order to harvest the traditional dietary staple of siihmuu (herring roe) have

come up empty handed. Boughs that would normally be laden with numerous layers of roe, two inches thick, are being hauled up with barely a single egg. Traditionally, herring spawning areas were heavily protected by Chiefs, and Nu-chah-nulth spawn-on-kelp/bough fishers used special “silent paddles” whenever they ventured into herring spawning areas.

The report continues: “Siihmuu/Kwaqmis is traditionally very important to us as it is the first resource to return to our territories after the winter,” said elder Nelson Keitlah. “In the days of my grandpa, no one was allowed to go into the spawning areas where the herring were looking for a place to spawn. Not even a noise from a canoe was allowed. People had a very high respect for the herring as they are a very important part of the food chain, and our diet,” he said. Keitlah fears the noise from the vessels, machinery and sonar are driving the herring down to depths where their eggs will not survive. “We’ve been saying for years that the sonar and machines are a total disrespect to the herring, and as a result the herring are now spawning in deep water, and not coming near shore where we can feed on them,” he said. “We haven’t had siihmuu/kwaqmis in recent years as it has been very scarce. We need to be able to harvest them in a natural, normal way, which is a much better way to do it than to harvest the roe by seiners.”

And in an article in the Globe and Mail, Reg Moody of the Heltsiuk people in Bella Bella said in a statement: “Who knows, maybe this province and country will soon see scenes on national TV of what took place with our brothers from Burnt Church on the east Coast. These stocks mean that much to us. Our way of life is at stake here,” he said. “To protect the future of the central coast region, the Heltsiuk and Kitasoo Xaixas have been instructed by their people not to allow a sein or gillnet sac-roe fishery in their traditional territories for the next season...”

The traditional method of stringing fronds of seaweed in spawning areas allowed the herring to lay their sticky eggs on the seaweed and then swim away. But the commercial method is harmful and unsustainable. The seiners are noisy, scaring the spawning herring away into deep waters, and the fish are killed to extract the egg sacs rather than allowing them to swim away. Combine this with industrial activity on or near their spawning grounds and the herring are increasingly threatened.

The fishery

This year a group of us living on Sla Dai Ich, an island in the strait that separates Vancouver Island from the mainland, decided that we should learn more about the natural cycle of the herring. The island that we live on is a regular stop for the annual pacific herring run. At roughly 250,000 tons, the herring that pass through our waters is one of the largest biomasses that moves on our planet, comparable say to the bison, mentioned earlier, two hundred years ago.

Because the fishery is essentially based strictly on the collection of roe, what actually occurs in the water is this: a convoy of fishing boats gather in the strait as the herring arrive in our waters to spawn. The schools of fish are surrounded by the boats and the smaller punts. Once the fishery is opened by government officials, the herring are brought onto the boats by nets, which are then slapped by large rotating paddles beating the herring out of the nets. From the shoreline one sees fish seemingly flying through the air onto boats. The females are gutted and the roe extracted to feed the hungry sushi and delicacy markets, while the males and the female carcasses are collected for animal food and fertilizer. About thirty to fifty boats gather on the waters off our shores. And while in reality they are a veritable platoon of parasites eagerly plundering this

incredible abundance of life, the boats appear rather innocuous, even picturesque, especially at night, when they are lit up and together resemble a small floating village.

There exists no local cottage food industry that harvests the fish for human consumption. Pickled herring and roll mops (delicious tasting strips of herring rolled around capers, pickles or olives and bathed in vinegar and spices) are sold locally but are imported from Europe.

There are 252 and 1254 gillnet licenses in the roe herring fishery alone. Fisheries and Oceans Canada set the quota and catch limit based on an “exploitation rate of 20% or less.” This means they ostensibly leave 80% of the stock in the ecosystem. But this is misleading because the Canadian commercial fishery takes only 20% of what moves through our waters. What about the American fishery, the sea lions, the salmon and cod, etc., who are also all feeding on this run? If the stocks continue to be affected by the contamination of spawning grounds and attacks on other aspects of the intertwined marine ecosystem, then it doesn’t matter what percent is taken the herring will eventually disappear unless the commercial fishery is terminated and the spawning grounds are protected from industrial activity. This year, 2005, the coast wide commercial roe herring allowable catch is 25,574 tons! The spawn on kelp fronds fishery is 3000 tons for 37 non-Heltsiuk licenses and 525 tons for the nine Heltsiuk licenses. It’s worth noting that the once abundant Haida Gwaii herring run is at a record low. In terms of statist laws and regulations, there is a whole herring daily limit of 20 kilograms and a possession limit of 40 kilograms for the so-called recreational fisher.

Camps

So a few friends and comrades went down to the shoreline and set up a small camp. A fire pit was set up, some fresh water brought down, a few posts and beams erected to define the area and as something for us to secure windbreaks to. Meanwhile, several of us gathered rock salt and pickling vinegar, capers, pickles, and food grade buckets. I phoned my mother on the East Coast of Canada to ask for a recipe and any tips she might have. Believe it or not, even though I’m only 46 years old, my mom grew up making her own soap from animal fat, churning her own butter, collecting nuts, weaving wool, harvesting firewood with horses and sleighs, etc. Her family lived with hardly any money. They had just enough from selling hazelnuts along the highway, firewood from their land and other small initiatives to pay their property taxes, buy oil and flour and a few other basics. In one generation all these skills have been lost in our family. While my mother mourns her childhood, she does so with much reservation. It was all too much work she complains. I think this is because the effort was done in the context of her family, without the deep roots of true village ways. Pioneer ways are different than a context of communal activity among others with whom we have strong kinship ties.

It so happened that a comrade from the Mauvaise Herbe green anarchist group in Montreal, was visiting. He came to the little camp and we had a talk about their activity and ours, shared some perspectives and gathered some fresh oysters to roast and eat. One of the things we talked about was the “individual self” and its development. He related how some tribes people from the Vietnam area traditionally didn’t use the word I, but rather usually spoke about themselves from the perspective of the relationship that they were engaged in at the moment of talking. For instance a person speaking to an uncle would say: “niece wants to walk with uncle”. An individual without community to rely on to share the demands and desires for shelter and food

and intimacy, for example, becomes groundless and atomized. Clearly we need to be embedded within a group of people. And a group of people has the best chance of enduring and thriving if embedded in a place.

A couple of friends got hold of a zodiac and ventured into the water armed with a video camera to document the commercial fishery. It was risky. Bobbing around in extremely choppy waters in a rubber dinghy trying to videotape a bunch of fishers who likely weren't too sure whether or not they wanted to allow it. After all, if anyone gets a lot of finger pointing from self-righteous urban environmentalists and activists, it's the rural wage slaves who do all the primary extraction and plundering of resources for urban civilization: loggers, fishers, miners, etc. So thanks to our three brave friends, we have a few hours of documentation to use in our arsenal for future use. But at that point we still hadn't gathered any herring.

Each day for about a week, a dedicated bunch of the group went down to the camp and waited to determine whether the herring had begun to fill the waters enough so that we could stand along the shoreline and net them, which is how it normally happens. The fish become so plentiful, that simply by dipping a net into the water, one can gather as many as a half dozen herring at a time! While they waited, they collected oysters and roasted them over the fire, and explained to others from our island community what they were up to. During that time many local friends, neighbors and comrades from urban centers came and went, some were just curious, but most were hoping to learn something and to participate in this subsistence approach to living.

One of the aspects of this attempt to learn and feed ourselves and understand one of the natural cycles of our region that was so appealing was that it wasn't about politics. Some called it our protest camp, others the herring camp, just the camp or even Vali's camp, after one of the core people who initiated the energy around it. But the days weren't intended on being spent arguing with politicians, trying to recruit members or handing our petitions. Here was a chance to feed ourselves, to build a culture not based on wage work, to learn new skills, and sadly, to witness and document another plunder. The small camp also reminded me of how little autonomous space we actually have. Apart from our local pirate radio station (yeah we're on air!), situated in a small trailer, and a small autonomous zone on a separate beach created by other locals, all we have are each other's homes to visit or commercial ventures to hang out in. But this was/is different. I think some of us would like to see a campsite or two permanently on our shoreline, regardless of the outcome of the herring fishery.

Eventually some fish were gathered and brought back to one of our homes. They were killed, their heads removed, then gutted and scales shed. Then after splitting them in two, the fillets were spread with mustard, wrapped around capers and pickles and placed in a bucket of pickling vinegar and onions, to be eaten at a later time. We didn't succeed in filling our hampers for the next several months, in fact we barely harvested any, but we took a first step. That's how all great dreams are realized. Hopefully next year we'll be a little luckier and a little more experienced. Maybe eventually local kids will stay out of school, comrades will come visit from urban centers and we'll all spend a few weeks just gutting and pickling herring as an extended group of friends, neighbors and rebels. Over time we will feel compelled to defend the ecological integrity of these waters and to protect the herring that dwell in them and which help sustain us.

Webs

The Pacific herring play a huge role in the marine ecosystem of our territory. Herring are an important part of the northern Pacific marine food web. They are a food source for gulls, ducks, pilchards and jelly fish. Pacific cod, lingcod, halibut, Chinook salmon and harbor seals all have diets largely comprised of herring. Three quarters of the lingcod's diet consists of herring. The near shore and intertidal environment is critical to the continued abundance of the herring. This is where they deposit their eggs and only at very specific locations. It is important for us to protect the spawning grounds closest to us. In some areas, for instance Cherry Point in Puget Sound, herring stocks have declined rapidly over the past decades. The decline is attributed to a high level of commercial fishing and to contamination of the spawning grounds by industrial activity.

Commercialized, market driven, mass levels of fishing are not sustainable. We need to re-learn how to integrate our lives into this fishery as we do with all of the natural cycles in each of our regions. We need to take care of the places where we live. It isn't hysteria to suggest that the herring might eventually disappear from over-fishing and bureaucratic mismanagement. The herring should be here for our great-great-great grandchildren. As the herring dwindle, so too will the other fish that feed on them, while the life forms that the herring feed on will become overpopulated. All this will create imbalance and ill health and contribute to the eventual collapse of the complex marine ecosystem of our potential territories.

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