

## In the Heart of Old Growth Cedars

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

In October 2008, my wife and I went on a business trip combined with a mini vacation to the beautiful Golden area in the eastern part of British Columbia. We made a point of visiting the two old-growth forests found there along the Trans Canada Highway.



It was a perfect day for walking in a thick old growth forest—shafts of brilliant sunshine penetrating the lush canopy and turning particularly one of the two forest enclaves into an enchanted land. With even a little bit of imagination, you could see the woodland come alive with magical creatures: elves, fairies, sprites, pixies, imps, trolls, and goblins.

No imagination was needed to witness countless plants—from huge Cedars to ferns, mosses, mushrooms, and dainty flowers—burgeoning without restraint. The section of the two protected areas we were allowed to walk through was full of moisture and bubbling brooks. You could say the forests were dripping with life.

Only one other pilgrim shared the forest with us. We encountered him on the way into the opulent green. He was on his way out, heading farther west on his bicycle. He encouraged us: “Go on. It’s worth it.” Was “worth” the right word? We thought “worth” was far removed from where we were. Here was true value. Nature in herself has no price tag. We were sure his choice of words ill conveyed what the young man was feeling. His eyes were beaming, and his heart was brimming.



Our old Australian herding dog, Bear, was so spell-bound by the greenery that he forgot to bark at the stranger. He walked with us through the forest unexceptionally calmly and for hours afterward was obviously transformed by this experience.

Even though we were obliged—and rightly so—to walk on demarcated and carefully constructed pathways, we felt an integral part of the forest environment. We inhaled the invigorating cool, moist air and were glad to imbibe the sun’s warm rays filtering through the foliage. Bending down toward the ground, we delighted in the musty scent of decaying old leaves and rotting tree trunks.

Above all, we drank in big gulps Nature's abundant silence—a kind of silence that is much more than the absence of noise. It seemed to us as if the giant trees were creating a life-giving, sacred space for all organisms in their vicinity. The trees formed an open-air cathedral, and in the air hung a whispered *mantra*: "Be here. Relax. Enjoy. Remember."



As it should be in real life, new growth and decay were in close proximity. Even so-called dead wood was teeming with life. In fact, it was the old that was giving rise to the new. Despite a surfeit of toppled trees, fallen branches, and randomly dropped leaves, the forests were a diligent symphony rather than careless chaos.

Had it not been late in the day, with light fading fast, we would have felt moved to linger, sit on the walkway, and remain quiet for eons. We drove back to our vacation home in silence, with the soft melody of the old-growth Cedar forest resonating deep within us.

Then the questions came tumbling in. Why can the world not be filled with forests like the ones we had just had the privilege of seeing and breathing along with? Why are we ravaging our old-growth forests as if they and the abundant life they shelter could readily renew themselves? Why do people not feel awe at life forms that have lived for 500 years?

What worry and stress must plague those who unhesitatingly take their lives? When an average human meets a hero, is there not even a moment of hesitation, of trepidation, at axing someone who is greater than you? Is the average human's thought so small that it automatically recoils from the majesty of giants and only contemplates their instantaneous destruction? Do the great ones have to be forced into democratic compliance? When everything is leveled, we will not all be equal and uniform but dead like felled trees.

Once upon a time, half of our planet's land surface was thick with forests. Then human civilization happened. Hamlets turned into villages; villages into towns; towns into cities; and cities into millions-strong megapolises. Century after century, houses, wagons, fences, bridges, boats, and furniture have been built from wood and, most importantly, fire places have been stoked in millions of homes.



In modern times, trees are nonchalantly exploited by the construction industry and above all are casually converted into paper mountains, especially by the mass media and their meaningless prattle. In particular, old-growth trees even have been used frivolously for tissue and toilet paper thanks to companies like Kimberly Clark, which has been labeled as downright “evil.”

In 2005, The Global Forest Resources Assessment studied 229 countries and concluded that the Earth’s forests (at that time) assimilated 283 gigatons (283,000,000,000 metric tons) of carbon, which otherwise would float around in the atmosphere. Forests, it has been conclusively shown after long debate, are excellent and vital carbon sinks. That is to say, they gobble up carbon and create oxygen without which our planet—and we—would be obsolete.

Since the dawn of civilization, our human population has thrived and expanded exponentially, while the tree population has significantly dwindled and, unless appropriate counter measures are taken now, is destined to vanish along with us. As noted in *Green Yoga*:

Although the land surface of the Earth is truly vast, it is far from infinite. The poets’ evocative phrase “immortal soil” is as misleading as the scientists’ and politicians’ catchphrase “progress.” Feeding over 6.6 billion mouths, especially with so many given to a taste for meat, places a huge strain on the land.\*1

Today we are still and ever more rapidly decimating the Earth’s woodlands to meet our so-called needs, such as making room for urban sprawl or for pasture land, or for planting toxic soy beans (as notably in Brazil), which the food industry dubiously touts as optimal for human consumption.

Since the 1700s, the percentage of forested land has shrunk by one third. Only one-fifth of the original old-growth forest still exists. The ongoing reduction of forested land represents an enormous loss in biodiversity, that is, in survivability.

At the Fifth World Parks Congress convened in Durban in 2003, scientists were agreed “that biological diversity is on the brink of mass extinction.” In only two decades, wilderness areas have been reduced by half, and yet logging companies and their clients continue to clamor for more timber. Clear-cutting is the preferred modus operandi, and most politicians connive at this ruthless and contemptuous treatment of Nature. As stated in *Green Dharma*:

. . . it is good to keep in mind that every year, the Earth is robbed of an estimated 30 million acres of forest, or c. 45,000 square miles (or 120,000 square kilometers). Visualize what this means: It represents an area roughly the size of Denmark or the size of the U.S. state Pennsylvania.\*2



Livestock is now using up to 30 percent of the Earth's land surface, and raising cattle is a hugely destructive enterprise from various points of view. To put it bluntly: a cow in exchange for a tree is a bad bargain all round. This has been well documented. Often governments subsidize commercial logging and the cattle industry, neither of which would be possible without this often generous support.

The rate of loss in biodiversity is alarming even to the most conservative biologists who are not in the employ of the timber industry. Few attempts are made to protect biodiversity, which is essential to everyone's survival. More and more experts warn that biosphere collapse—the end of life on Earth—is a frightful specter that is increasingly likely. The extinction rate is assessed at being in the neighborhood of 150 plant and animals species per day. Per day! That's c. 50,000 species per year!

How many more vanishing species will it take before our own species is doomed? According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment of 2005, some 10–30 percent of mammalian, avian, and amphibian species are currently threatened with extinction.

It is normal for entire species to disappear in the course of evolution, because they are unable to meet the challenge of survival. But this “background extinction rate” is now 1,000 (!) times higher than normal. The present eco-catastrophe has rightly been labeled the *Sixth Mass Extinction*, because it compares unfavorably to the previous mass extinction—the era of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago.

*Extinction*—a term that biologists don't use lightly—is heard ever more frequently. But for most consumers, life goes on as usual. As my wife and I were walking back to our car after enjoying the old-growth Cedar forests in British Columbia, we were only too well aware of our own hand in the fatal business of extinction. However much we have tried to curtail our level of consumption, we have never yet succeeded in making our lifestyle *truly* sustainable.

We believe that this is virtually impossible, short of living a gatherer's austere lifestyle, which in the northern hemisphere is unfeasible. We humbly admit that, collectively and individually, we are very much in debt to all nonhuman organisms on our planet. In order to live, we inevitably deprive them of their life by our mere “civilized” presence and consumption.

Admitting our inherent personal limitation, we must yet most vigorously affirm that *we and everyone else have the solemn and urgent obligation to make radical strides toward simplicity.*

Environmental protectionism is not enough. Recognizing that we, as human beings, are an integral part of Nature and not its self-important stewards, we must seriously commit to changing *ourselves*. As conscious organisms, who are the principal cause of today's biological catastrophe, we have the unquestioned obligation to live *responsibly*. What does this mean? It means that, we have to live as much in harmony with Nature as we can possibly muster.

**We and everyone else have the solemn and urgent obligation to make radical strides toward simplicity**

*Living in harmony with Nature* means living in harmony with our inner nature and our outer environment. In practical terms, we must curb our wants, our demands on the world around us as if it were an inexhaustible teat. We must live as simply and self-sufficiently as we can and put a stop to the habit of rampant consumption to which our society has addicted us.

Another way of putting it is to say that we ought to cultivate *biophilia*, that is, a deeply felt empathy for life—not just for our own family but every being clinging to life. As the Mahayana Buddhists put it, we must extend tender care to all our “mothers,” however miniscule, “unworthy,” and (by our human standards) “ugly” they may be. Who are we, as human beings, to say which beings deserve to be annihilated or deprived of their nutrition or life space? Who appointed us to this task other than through human hubris and self-delusion?

The philosophy of stewardship, as promoted in some religions, is debatable and ought to be carefully reviewed. It might well be rooted in the barren soil of false self-importance. We are, however, called to practice universal compassion. Because it does not put our own species or individuality above all others, such practice can only be life sustaining and morally good. To quote from *Green Dharma* again:

If biophilia, or empathy for life, is throbbing in us, we naturally want to reach out and help.\*3



Between 1997 and 1999, for 738 days, environmental activist and author Julia Butterfly Hill lived in a 180-foot-tall, 600-year-old Redwood tree which/whom she named *Luna*. Her heart was touched by the plight of old-growth trees, and she felt called to protest the nonstop destruction of the original Redwoods of Northern California. Risking her own life and limb, Julia was constantly being harassed and threatened and in the end consented to climb down from her makeshift perch. Under great public pressure, the Pacific Lumber Company agreed to preserve *Luna* and all growth around the tree within a buffer zone of three acres.

Subsequently, Julia established The Engage Network, a nonprofit corporation, which continues to connect people to Nature through education and by example. Like many others, who are still far too few, the volunteers of her organization have committed their lives to speaking up for the mouthless tree elders. Although the number of environmental activists has grown, their impact on our everyday consumer society has, sadly, been negligible.

Humanity seems hell-bent on self-destruction. Will wisdom prevail in time to change the lethal course of our species, which has proudly and possibly prematurely named itself *Homo sapiens*?

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1. Georg Feuerstein and Brenda Feuerstein, *Green Yoga* (Eastend, Canada: Traditional Yoga Studies, 2007), p. 90.

2. Georg Feuerstein and Brenda Feuerstein, *Green Dharma* (Eastend, Canada: Traditional Yoga Studies, 2008), p. 42.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

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