

The Complexities of Hope: Wildlife Sanctuaries and Everyday Solutions

By Michael Tobias and Jane Gray Morrison

The following material is is excerpted from, *God's Country: The New Zealand Factor*, by Michael Tobias and Jane Gray Morrison, A Dancing Star Foundation Book. Copyright Dancing Star Foundation, 2010

Hope for a country, what does it mean, against the backdrop of a biologically-interdependent world? A nation is not one individual, but an idea held together by forces whose historical origins and continuing power-hold over state, provincial and regional governments, communities, indigenous stakeholders, neighborhoods, households and dwellers within offers solutions based upon compromises. Inevitably, for all of the chatter regarding ethics, water holes dry up, animals starve, are poached, or consumed; natural calamities tax the staying power of empathy, weariness works feverishly against the desire to do the right thing, and public shifts in sentiment and perception mirror economic fall-out, judicial perspectives and seismic shifts in the esteem that would, otherwise, lend force and pertinacity to the inspired visions of individuals.

When these tried and true fundamentals of the human spirit are flattened, when reality backlashes, the power goes out, a piece of the world is inundated, even compromises are stretched to the breaking point. When debate rages over a sub-division – to protect x-number of acres – a compromise, hammered out by voters, developers, lawyers and biological opinions, or a single judge, again replicates the template of an imperfect process. There will always be end-losers and no spiritual tradition has offered much guidance, beyond faith and courage. Some argue that jaguars should be returned to the Southwest United States. Others declare that such critical habitat is not critical at all because jaguars never, in fact, occupied that region during previous millennia. There is a jaguar sanctuary in Belize, which provides geographical connectivity to thousands of other individual jaguars all the way into the Amazon, whereas Arizona, for example, is cut off, and might support all of a few individual animals. For jaguars, Arizona might simply mean a kind of zoo. But nobody knows for certain and neither Darwin nor Linneaus could have invoked any ethical imperative that should help resolve outstanding ambivalences.

Part of the crisis that attends upon an individual's perspective is the raft of data and opinion that is vulnerable to a myriad of personal or abused filtration mechanisms we have developed as organisms with personality, attitude, circumstances peculiar to each and every one of us, and genes. In other words, our pre-existing biases, desires and needs will necessarily alter any discussion or impression we are likely to glean from our perceptions of the state of the world

on any given morning. But that alteration may or may not be helpful. If anything, it further addles the possibility of resolution. Resolution may be foreign to nature, generally speaking, particularly in light of the perpetual motion that are eco-dynamics. Botanists speak of climax forests, but these, too, reach the zenith of growth and die out, whilst the vast majority of a tree, unseen, provides hospice for a multiplicity of other organic activities which, in turn, offer plentiful empirical evidence for specialists, but no abiding maxims. All that can be adduced with some level of clarity is the fact mother-nature has spent over four billion years nurturing every quantum of life-fostering opportunities. By undermining those achievements, we act to destroy that which we don't understand; much like an intransitive verb that defames and desecrates with no knowledge of the direct objects, let alone the (hopefully) received wisdom in the aftermaths of biological history involving our kind.

Add to this the swirl of compromises, persuasions and guesswork – usually pertaining in some direct or indirect way to economic indicators – and it becomes quickly apparent that we are caught in a maze. Call it an ethical, financial, ecological, or political labyrinth. There is no light at the end of such tunnels other than that vague clamor in our hearts called *hope*, what poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) referred to as “the thing with feathers...”¹

That feather, and the hope it has always connoted, contrasts with “a Funeral in My Brain,” another one of her poems, drawing attention to her ineluctable solitude, and to the state of affairs that would see the last 22 years of her brief 56 years of life swamped by illness (eye and kidney problems) and the deaths of her father, her mother, several friends, and her nephew. The three existing Dickinson collections, a total of 1800 poems, many written in pencil, without titles, were gathered after her death by her sister Lavinia. During her lifetime, Dickinson published only seven such poems. Moreover, it was not until 1955 that the first complete set of the original poems were published together following the rediscovery of the original works by Thomas Johnson.²

Perhaps what stands out most poignantly in her three stanza poem about a bird are the last two lines, “Yet, never, in extremity/It asked a crumb of me.” It is this “crumb” that strikes at the heart, both as metaphor and reality. *Crumb* is one of the stranger words in etymological history, with roots dating back to Attic (ancient Greek) and becoming common before 1200 A.D., and encompassing German, English, French, Latin, Slovenian, Greek, Danish and Russian. In fact, the word seems to track with the migration of birds from the Arctic to the Mediterranean, which raises a host of contemporary provocations.

For example, the island of Cyprus is mid-way along the annual migratory route for millions of birds from Europe to North Africa, 90% of whom are endangered to various degrees. Yet, in the year 2008, poachers on Cyprus killed “over one

million songbirds” that had stopped to rest, seek food and water, during their migration. The poachers killed them most likely for “culinary delicacies”.³

Such leaps –from a secluded poet buried at the West Cemetery in Amherst, Massachusetts – to the Mediterranean, are not rare exceptions. Songbirds have migrated from North America to Brazil for millions of years. In fact, in the 1850s, Henry David Thoreau was the first to make notes of the arriving songbirds to Concord, Massachusetts. Two later ornithologists chimed in with data extending well into the 20th century, William Brewster and Ludlow Griscom. Then, in 2008, the same year BirdLife Cyprus reported its statistics on poaching of songbirds, a study came out from Boston University that showed at least 24 species of songbirds arriving earlier in Concord than during Thoreau’s time.⁴

What is important to realize in drawing such associations is the fact that songbirds (all vocally gymnastic members of the Passeriformes order), comprise some 4000 species, or nearly 40% of all known bird species in the world. To discover such attrition on one small island, is horrendous, but this is the state of the world now: global warming, poaching, utter disarray. Yet *hope*, which has also been thought of as the most logical conclusion to an illogical world, is our only common tool for jumpstarting some form of ecological redemption. Hence, Emily Dickinson’s extraordinary intuition and importance to the realms of ecological literacy.

The complexities are worth exploring in some depth because they rightly point the way, in each instance, to the same need for hope. In the case of avifauna, as of October, 2009, a known 1217 bird species were “deemed endangered or vulnerable to extinction.” New Zealand is in the path of one of eight major global migratory routes, the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, that goes from the Arctic, passing through on average 19 nations before touching down in Australia and/or New Zealand.⁵

Given that New Zealand has already lost a known “32 per cent of land and freshwater birds and 18 per cent of sea birds” the pressing realities of bird losses come to our very backyards. But that, in turn, raises a different set of qualifiers, not all hopeless. Migrations of Caribou in Alaska and the Yukon, of Elk in Wyoming and Montana, Wildebeest in East Africa and – the longest of all known mammalian migrations, those of the Gray whales who travel up to 12,000 miles (roundtrip) from Baja California to the Arctic and back, feeding on increasingly-scarce amphipods on the ocean floors – all require places to rest along the way. ⁶ A ruby-throated hummingbird weighing less than 5 grams “can use stored fat to fuel a non-stop, 24-hour flight across a 600-mile stretch of open water from the U.S. Gulf coast to the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico!” ⁷

Some albatross and terns can fly for thousands of miles without stopping (in fact, the Arctic tern has been known to fly 18,600 miles annually, stopping to catch fish along the way, but when they do stop to breed, they are exhausted, as one would expect, and they require safe havens, whether birds, turtles, ungulates or butterflies. To store up to 20% of their body weight as fat, birds become what is known as *hyperphagic* prior to their migrations, eating as much as possible, whether insects, or whatever other food supplies they depend upon, in a primordial and knowing anticipation of the metabolic output that will be required for their upcoming journeys. Along the way, many will stop to rest. Songbirds rest during the day and keep their altitudes to below 2000 feet, typically, whereas Bar-headed geese have been known to fly directly above Mount Everest, at over 29,000 feet. Songbirds fly at night. Those “stopover sites, or staging areas” as they are called⁸ are critical rejuvenation areas. Birds may spend weeks there, or just a day or two, depending on numerous factors. But what has recently emerged as an important factor in the success of these migrations are the increasingly scarce habitat areas suitable for their needs, that may be as small as 11,000 square feet, or about a quarter of an acre. Thus, *backyard refugia* have recently emerged in the scientific literature as life-saving spots across the planet. In a study of plant diversity, density and distribution within the most northerly of all neotropical parks, the rainforest of Los Tuxtlas, Mexico, scientists discovered that even according to a “standardized sample size” of “0.1 ha” or slightly less than a quarter acre, plant diversity can flourish, and similar findings for birds have been reported.⁹

If a backyard, even potted native plants on a balcony can help in the effort to restore some balance to the ecological tumult our species has precipitated, then the world is indeed watching and listening to our individual efforts. As James Cameron’s film “Avatar” magnificently points out to the popular audience, the Earth seeks balance, taking no sides. That said, compliance with said balance requires more than disinterest and neutrality. Neutrality will not save the destruction of rainforests, and while no one can claim understanding of the laws of nature, as science, bioethics, even religions debate, falter, flounder and test one hypothesis after another, opinions and test results, whether biased, divisive, or inconclusive, require effort. Effort, in turn, relies upon deeply invested convictions, whether they prove to be misguided, or spot on. Conviction is everything, even as it morphs and undergoes refinement. And because we are a young species relative to most others on the planet, we behave like restless adolescents, eager to make things happen; to unfold our wings. This collective energy can easily be harnessed, and that is the true message of hope. Examples from daily literature are legion.

In England, farmers and ecologists have adopted joint measures, for example, to help birds survive one of the most devastating winters in recent years throughout the U.K., namely, an initiative by farmers to leave up to 4% of their

croplands follow in the same spirit as the above referenced backyard nursery concept. Moreover, the British government has provided a “Farmland Bird Package” to compensate farmers who engage in this Campaign for the Farmed Environment.¹⁰ Indeed, Pied Wagtails (*Motacilla alba*) have been seen venturing close to homes where they are “most likely to find insects due to the warmth”.

11

Such examples should provide the beginnings of a blueprint for the nearly seven billion *Homo sapiens*, the majority of whom now live in cities, but must view themselves as in critical partnership with the billions of other people living in rural or wilderness areas, not to mention the more than 100 million other species multiplied by the millions of individuals per many of those species who all share and cohabit this sacred Earth with us.

Footnotes

1 - See “Emily Dickinson – Biography and Works”, www.online-literature.com/dickinson/

2 – *ibid.* See also *Poems*. Edited by two of her friends, Mabel Loomis Todd & T. W. Higginson, Maggs Bros. Ltd.

www.abebooks.com/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=439622054&searchurl=an%Demi%2B.. See *The Poems Of Emily Dickinson, Including Variant Readings Critically Compared With All Known Manuscripts*, Edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 3 volumes, First Edition, 1955.

3 – See “Animal Migrations May Be Moving Towards Extinction,” *AWI Quarterly*, Spring 2009, pp.17-18, n.a.

4 - See “Are songbirds arriving earlier in Thoreau’s Concord as the climate warms?” by Libby Bacon and Richard B. Primack, Boston University, “OOS 20-2 –Shake-up in Timing in Ecological Communities: Understanding the Complexity and the Role of Citizen Science,”

<http://eco.confex.com/eco/2008/techprogram/P10085.HTM>

5 - See “Alexander Gillespie: More effort needed in global strategy to protect birdlife,” October 13, 2009, nzherald.co.nz,

www.nzherald.co.nz/animals/news/print.cfm?c_id=500834&objectid=10602796&p...

6 - *op.cit.*,

7- See “Bird Migration Facts,” by Kerry Scanlan, Vicki Piaskowski, Michelle Jacobi and Steve Mahler,” *Zoological Society Of Milwaukee*,

www.zoosociety.org/Conservation/BWB-ASF/Library?BirdMigrationFacts.php

8 - *ibid.*, “Bird Migration Facts

9 - See “Value of Small Patches in the Conservation of Plant-Species Diversity in Highly Fragmented Rainforest,” by Victor Arroyo-Rodriguez, Eduardo Pineda, Federico Escobar, and Julieta Benitez-Malvido, *Conservation Biology*, Volume 23, No.3, pp.734-735.

10 - See Country Life, January 20, 2010, p.33. Indeed, Pied Wagtails (*Motacilla alba*) have been seen venturing close to homes where they are “most likely to find insects due to the warmth”.

11 - *ibid*, “Keeping cheerful through the freeze,” by MH, p.36.