

MUSINGS ON WILDNESS AND PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND

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HERE'S A CURIOUS THING, something I hadn't thought about for years until this August morning, after savoring Marybeth Holleman's essay, "What Wilderness Gives": the first wild place I visited in Alaska was Prince William Sound.

In June 1974, I spent a few days on Latouche Island, at the Sound's southwestern fringes. I didn't go there for pleasure or adventure, but to work. (Although I suppose that job was its own sort of adventure.) A geologist at the time, brand new to the state, I was assigned to a claim-staking crew. Relying on that trickster, memory, what I recall now is the cold, wet weather, the thick gray, oppressive clouds, an abundance of snowfields (at least at higher elevations), and a forested island of large evergreen trees. To be honest, I don't recollect the target of our staking effort, only that the days were long and exhausting and not much fun.

A quick Google search informs me that several copper prospects were discovered and staked on Latouche in the late 1890s, so copper was likely our target too. Developed into a mine in the early 1900s, one of the original prospects eventually produced substantial copper ore and sparked the birth of a town; nearly 4,000 people reportedly once inhabited the island. Eventually both the mine and town were abandoned, but some ruins remain. So Latouche Island isn't exactly wilderness, at least as we usually imagine it. But it has stayed with me as a place of raw wildness.

After returning to Anchorage, I joined a crew bound for the Central Brooks Range. In a matter of days—maybe even my first day in the range—I fell in love with that mountainous Arctic landscape. Latouche, meanwhile, became something of an afterthought, an interesting but largely forgettable sidenote to the start of my love affair with Alaska, and especially its wildlands and waters. Despite the remoteness and challenges of getting there, I've repeatedly returned to the Brooks Range and journeyed deep into its wilderness. Yet I've barely touched the wildness of Prince William Sound's "3,500-mile-long undulation of capes and fjords and islands and islets and sea stacks."

I can't help but wonder: if the days had been sunny and mild and I'd had more free time to explore Latouche Island and its surrounding waters, or maybe had some memorable wild-life encounter, would I have become enchanted enough with the place to further explore Prince William Sound? First impressions are indeed sometimes crucial in determining what shape a relationship takes.

So, unlike Marybeth Holleman and many other Alaskan friends, I have not become intimate with Prince William Sound. Instead, through their stories and images and enthusiastic advocacy, I've been something of a distant admirer. And there is clearly much to admire and love and protect in the Sound, wilderness and wildness galore in the form of glaciers, ice-choked bays, sheltering forests, rugged mountains, bears and berries, pods of whales and teeming birds and salmon, shrimp and secluded ponds, on and on it goes, with the additional blessings of solitude and natural quiet, and the opportunity to pay close attention to wild landscapes and seascapes, to embrace the wild neighbors that most of us too often and too easily ignore in our overly hectic and self-centered urban lives.

As I've written elsewhere, I didn't clearly understand the importance of wild nature to my life when I came north to Alaska at the age of 24. Or perhaps better put, I'd gradually forgotten its importance, something I'd intuitively understood as a young boy. In Alaska (both while working as a geologist in the mid-1970s and after resettling here in 1982, reincarnated as a writer), I gradually rediscovered my early passions and reformed the primal bonds that connect me to the more-than-human world. Along the way, I have redefined—and continue to explore—what wildness means to me, and its relevance to my life and the larger American culture.

Even in our high-tech, polluted, and increasingly urban world of the early twenty-first century, wild nature is all around us, all the time. Here in Anchorage, it's easier to notice the city's wilds, what with moose and bears roaming our streets and salmon swimming our creeks. But I also think of the trees and mushrooms in our yards, the mosquitoes and aphids that pester us and our plants in summer, the birds that sing and call throughout the year, the spiders and mice that sometimes make their way into our houses, the rain and snow and sunshine, the germs and bacteria we carry around.

The wildness also lurks within us. Our bodies, our imaginations, our dreams and emotions and ideas are wild. But in going about our busy, modern lives, we consciously or unconsciously suppress, deny, ignore, or forget our wildness.

Still, the wild animal remains, waiting for release. And—naturally—it's most easily set free in wild surroundings free of artifice and development. Free, largely, of the human touch. That's why the *feeling* of wildness most deeply resonates within us when we enter wilderness, whether in the high Arctic or Prince William Sound. And for many of us, the longer we stay in the "wilds," the more connected, refreshed, invigorated, and even healed we feel. There's a sense of being at ease, and sometimes even of being one with nature (which of course we are, whether or not we sense it). Something shifts *inside*.

That's what happened, I think, when I came to Alaska in the midseventies and spent several summers working deep in the wilderness, mostly within the Brooks Range. And it's clearly what has happened to Marybeth and several others I know in their explorations of Prince William Sound.

This is one of the reasons we humans need wilderness: for the deepened connection it provides to the larger, wilder world we inhabit. But there's a larger need beyond any gifts the wilderness gives to us humans: for the wildlands and waters themselves and the multitude of wild beings that inhabit those places. These other life-forms and landscapes have value in and of themselves, regardless of what they give to our species.

Besides an embrace of wilderness and wildness, we have a deep need for stories, such as the ones shared in this book. Now in my sixties, I recall the many wild places (both in Alaska and beyond) I've hoped or planned to explore but haven't. Most I will never visit. So, I—we—depend on stories to know the nature of places like Prince William Sound, stories about whales and salmon and bears, yes, but also stories about the ocean and weather's many moods; stories about jellyfish and iridescent, pinky-sized creatures that wriggle through the shallows; stories about the people who live and work and recreate here, who depend on the Sound's wild resources, its natural treasures. We need stories, too, that caution us about the harm that can be done to such places, the piles of plastic trash, illegal and wasteful harvests, many tons of oil ravaging a land- and seascape. And of course we need stories of restoration and hope, stories that show how we can more reverently and lovingly live on this wild, magical planet.