

WE'VE GOT TO GET BACK TO THE GARDEN

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My career began with a woman. It was summer, and I was 14 years old and deeply in love with a girl whose name I can't remember. I asked her out to the movies. My only problem was that I didn't have any money. So I asked my father if he could give me some. His response was, "I house, feed, and clothe you and your five brothers and sisters. If you want money to take your lady friend to the movies, go get a job." It was Friday afternoon after work hours, and when I asked my dad how to find a job, he suggested I walk up the street right away and speak with our neighbor, Fred Gabriel, a local contractor who built single-family housing subdivisions. I did. Fred said, "Sure. We'll pick you up at eight tomorrow morning. Bring your lunch and wear construction boots."

The next morning, Fred's pickup was in front of our house. I climbed in, and worked non-stop for the next eight hours on a housing subdivision: shoveling gravel into a basement, carrying shingles up a two-story ladder to a roofing crew, and spreading topsoil and seeding grass. I returned home aching and exhausted, took a shower, and fell asleep before dinner. I never did get to the movies with the girl.

At the end of that work-week, Friday afternoon, we gathered in Fred's garage for an ice-cold Rheingold beer, the first one I'd ever had, and probably the best one. Fred asked his work crew how the

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‘kid’ had done, and they responded, “Pretty well, but he has to learn to pace himself; he makes the rest of us look bad, but we’ll keep him.” After more teasing and laughing, I was handed my first paycheck, \$125. I couldn’t believe I could earn that much money in one week. I was hooked.

For that summer, I worked on the landscape crew under the tutelage of two aging Italian immigrants, relatives of Fred’s extended family business. They had come from the old country as stonemasons to build the Pennsylvania Railroad. I never got their real names but learned to refer to them as *pisa*, *gumba*, or *compa*. They only spoke broken English that was so mixed with a heavy dose of Italian swear words as to be unintelligible to me. I watched them closely and learned by example as we built the many stone retaining walls needed in the hilly terrain.

Although both were over 70, they could move boulders weighing more than a ton, using levers and sledges. They would either laugh or swear at me if I tried to muscle a large stone, graphically demonstrating what a hernia might do to my young sex life. I learned the art and craft of stone walls, and still love the intimacy of one rock interlocking with others to form a structure that may endure centuries of snows and thaws, provide animal homes, and define human borders.

Throughout high school, I worked for the same construction company during summers, weekends, and vacations. I only had to call the night before and show up in the morning. The paychecks paid for part of my college expenses. When I turned 18, my father shook my hand, told me that I was a man, and on my own financially, because he and my mother had younger ones to support. Looking back now, years later, I realize that one of the greatest gifts my father gave me was the ability to ask for a job, and then do it well. And the best part of the job was that I learned every step in building houses from foundations to chimneys, including finish cabinetry, reading architectural plans, landscaping, and dealing with people.

Armed with a Liberal Arts degree from Colgate University, and exposed to the cultural shifts in our society in the late 1960s and early ‘70s, catalyzed by Vietnam, hallucinogenic drugs, sexual

revolution, and similar influences, I realized that my father's advice—to find a good corporate job and stay with it, as he had done for his entire career with AT&T—was not my desired career track. I was inspired by the lyrics of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young: “We can change the world, rearrange the world ...” and “We've got to get back to the Garden...”

I enjoyed being in nature and building things, so I thought I might pursue a career in natural resource management. I hitchhiked to Syracuse and stopped at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY/ESF). I interviewed with the Dean of Admissions, Dr. Harry Payne. After listening to me carefully, Harry suggested that I was describing the landscape architecture profession, to which I responded, “Aren't they the ones who design gardens?” “Yes,” Harry replied. “They are also the ones who design and build our national parks.” That's what I wanted to do.

Harry walked me over to the Landscape Architecture Department, and Dean Brad Sear's office. In an engaging conversation, I learned that Brad had gained his experience with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) during the Great Depression, designing and building Skyline Drive in the Shenandoah National Park. I was convinced that landscape architecture was the profession for me. Brad gave me a teaching assistantship that paid for my graduate degree because, as he put it, “You're the first grad student I've ever interviewed who knows which end of the hammer to hold and has actual construction experience.” I had found a home, and it still serves me well.

An important aspect of my landscape architecture studies was an enhanced awareness of the incredible diversity and interrelationships of our planet, evolved through the interplay of geology, climate, soils, flora, fauna, and of course, human interactions with the natural world. Landscape architects call this a “sense of place”: a culture's perception of a landscape and subsequent use of the natural resources, based on its prevalent beliefs and values. A people's knowledge of place is the yeast that, over time, produces unique and sustainable land uses, foods, building materials, architecture, art, literature, music, clothing, and the many other items of cultural diversity. The land

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shapes culture and culture shapes the land.

The best lesson of my graduate work was to discover my avocation. It can be summed up in three statements: the whole world a garden, every place with a garden, every garden with a gardener.

The whole world a garden. The bountiful garden concept is described in the Old Testament and other religions' sacred scriptures. The Garden of Eden is an apt metaphor, whether or not we believe in that place, where daily sustenance was easily gathered; or the Adam and Eve tale about the loss of innocence, parental authority, and punishment; or the true story about a talking snake and apples that make you wiser.

We now know that the degradation of the earth's natural systems is accelerating, and it is at our peril that we ignore the signals. So I set this first unattainable goal for myself: to restore the earth's ecosystems and natural processes. We've got to get back to the Garden.

Every place with a garden. Natural scientists have identified the earth's major biogeographical provinces, terrestrial and marine ecoregions, ecosystems, natural communities, and plant and animal species, albeit with many species still unknown. Within each of these classifications, we should be setting aside enough landscape or seascape to preserve a full array of all living species and their habitat for generations to come. Today we are failing as stewards of nature, and are facing the greatest and most rapid extinction of species since dinosaurs roamed the earth. Only this time, we the people are causing it by destruction of natural habitats; over-exploitation of commercially viable plants, animals, and fish; polluting the atmosphere; and raising the planet's temperature beyond survivable limits for many species. We need to set aside large core natural areas, create corridors among those areas, and design permeable landscapes for the free-flow of species, unimpeded by built structures such as cities, hydroelectric dams, or other barriers.

Every garden with its gardeners. In order to succeed in reversing the degradation and loss of habitat and the species they contain, we need a new generation of scientists, planners, designers, and natural resource managers who have both a global understanding of the

threats our current civilization faces, and the creative, entrepreneurial, and leadership skills to change societal behavior. Even though it may sound anthropocentric, we need to become “planetary managers” and begin a new era of restoration, and set in place corrective societal behaviors so we might live in harmony with the multitude of species with which we share this special place. Training the next generation to take over the helm of “Spaceship Earth” (Buckminster Fuller’s term) is paramount in my work.

While writing the final chapters of my graduate thesis on the Adirondack Park, I got lucky beyond my expectations. My advisor, George Earle, explained to me that he had just returned from Chile’s Patagonia region, and their National Forest Corporation (CONAF) needed a landscape architect to design and build a new national park that “looked like Yosemite, only a hundred years ago.” He asked whether I knew of anyone who might be interested in going there to work. “Yes,” I replied, “and please don’t tell anyone else.” The luckiest part was that the most important woman in my life, my wife, Katherine, said, “Yes, let’s go on this adventure.” I had landed an international job in my desired profession to go to a wilderness I could only imagine.

In 1976, Katherine and I were accepted by the U.S. Peace Corps, specifically for positions in Chile’s Torres del Paine National Park, a spectacular and remote place at the southern tip of South America. Our work was to assist CONAF in converting an extensive 250,000-acre sheep ranch to a national park and building infrastructure for tourism. It was indeed like Yosemite over a hundred years ago, after sheep had overrun that valley. It took a major effort by the Chilean government to restore the heavily degraded land and create an enduring national park that has become a world-class destination today.

Our first impression of Torres del Paine was that it was a scene from a J. R. R. Tolkien novel, with impassable windswept mountains, stunted ancient trees, and foreboding ice caps and glaciers. From our doorstep, we could see real wilderness, where no human being had set foot.

Remoteness is a relative term in today’s 2015 society (which

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includes the Internet), so I will describe it. Katherine and I lived in a park guard outpost on Lago Grey. It was a 25-mile horseback ride from the park's administrative center at Lago Toro, and took another six hours in a four-wheel-drive vehicle to get to Puerto Natales, the nearest town where we could buy supplies. To the west, our nearest neighbor was Pochongo, a hermit who lived in a shepherd line shack about 15 miles away, at Lago Zapata, which drained directly from the overhanging continental ice-sheet. We suffered from bouts of loneliness, as a month would pass without seeing anyone or hearing news from the outside world.

We were also excited by working in a place so sublimely spectacular that it could take your breath away in the alpine-glow of a mountain sunset. For those who have never experienced self-reliance in the wilderness, trust me, it's very humbling, and you don't want to screw up, because someone may die.

If I had been a fledgling landscape architect for the U.S. National Park Service (USNPS), it would have been years before I would be given the task of designing and building a national park, but here I was, at 26 years old, with that awesome opportunity. My CONAF counterparts, the park director and construction foreman, were also recent university graduates. We would spend evenings discussing priority construction project designs, available materials, and crew schedules. Our designs were built into trails, roads, bridges, visitor interpretive centers, and lodgings which are still in place today.

One interesting learning experience was when the three of us decided to widen a particularly dangerous blind curve on the main road along the Pehóe Lake shore, where a head-on traffic accident had occurred. There was a 40-foot-high cliff of shale that had formed a "nose," which we intended to blast to improve the sight distance. None of us had ever used dynamite, but we studied the techniques in our engineering manuals and convinced ourselves that we could do it. In the field, we surveyed the line and had the crews manually drill the postholes to set the charges. When the big day arrived, we cautiously placed the dynamite, and wired it to the plunger at a safe distance. The explosion was loud, and the rock face crumbled exactly

as we had planned. But, within seconds, there was a second crash from a half mile away, at the island's tourist hotel across Pehoé Lake. We hadn't calculated the sound wave, and blew out two stories of ten-foot-high plate glass windows. The next morning, a terse telegram appeared from the regional chief: "NO MAS DINAMITA!"

After a year in the park, we realized that there was no manual in Spanish for the design and construction of national parks, so we wrote one. Several editions were published by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) over the coming years. Again, I was lucky insofar as there was no other reference material available in Latin America, and my name became associated with building national parks and protected areas at a time when those developing countries wanted the economic development that nature tourism could bring. I've been working my way north from Patagonia ever since.

We returned from Patagonia to the U.S. with a new son, Ian, born in Punta Arenas, within sight of the Strait of Magellan. As a young out-of-work father, I knocked on many doors, and was rewarded by a short-term consultancy with the United Nations Man and the Biosphere Programme to advise the Honduran government on the creation of the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve on the Caribbean Coast.

As the pilot and I flew from the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa over the Continental Divide, the landscape changed from cattle pastures and patches of coffee plantations to lush tropical rainforest cover. After circling low to chase the grazing cattle off the grass strip, we landed near the beach, and I walked the five miles into the village of Barra Plátano alone. There I met our team of five from the Honduran Ministry of Natural Resources. My official charge was to undertake an assessment of the natural resources of the 500,000-acre Río Plátano watershed, recommend boundaries for a proposed Biosphere Reserve, and estimate a three-year budget.

A day later, we loaded our gear on tuc-tucs and headed upriver for a week-long expedition into the uncharted territory of the upper Río Plátano. It was an intriguing trip, due to rumors of a fabled lost "White City" built by ancient people who left curious pictographs

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carved into large boulders along the river course, and the archeological remnants of elaborate tools and grinding stones found in the area. After we had passed upriver rapids beyond the last native settlement, we entered old-growth tropical rainforest, with magnificently tall trees, abundant vines, orchids, and the hidden sounds of birds, monkeys, and other unseen animals. So this was the Garden, I told myself. This is the way the world once was.

Our expedition had been traveling along the river for a few days when I decided to travel into the forest interior to get a better sense of it, and asked for a guide to accompany me. We would reunite with the group several miles further upriver at day's end.

The change from the open sunlit river to the jungle darkness was immediate. My field of vision reduced from hundreds of yards to only several feet in front of me. A green and confusing wall of vines, leaves, tree trunks, and branches obstructed our way. Beside me, a barefoot native guide in gym shorts and a tee shirt, armed with a machete, pointed in the direction we should go. I didn't speak his dialect and he didn't speak Spanish. I followed him along a game trail, and inhaled the dank richness unique to tropical rainforests, and began to question leaving my colleagues on the river.

About an hour into our hike, my guide suddenly laid the flat side of his machete across my chest, stopping me. I looked at him, he looked at me and smiled, and then he looked to a place about a foot in front of my face. Then I saw it. An 18-inch-long emerald-green eyelash viper was directly in front of my head, with jaws wide and fangs bared, ready to strike, and I had missed it. The snake blended in perfectly with the thin vines and leaves where its prehensile tail was attached. If bitten in the face or neck, I would die. I spent the remainder of our hike hallucinating on every leaf, vine, and root. We rejoined our team before sunset. I ate a hearty meal and dropped into an exhausted sleep. I had learned about the Garden, snakes, and wisdom.

Returning from Honduras, I found work in beautiful Saratoga Springs, New York, with the LA Partnership, where I completed the required two-year apprenticeship and passed the New York State Landscape Architecture licensing exam. Soon afterward, internation-

al work called again, when Dr. Craig MacFarland, of the Tropical Research Center, asked if I would be interested in being a consultant to Panama's fledgling national parks system, as a component of the Panama Canal Treaty. Katherine was six months pregnant with our second son, Patrick, and when we learned that a live-in maid would be an affordable option, we left for another adventure.

As with many other Latin American countries of that period, Panama was governed by a military dictator, General Omar Torrijos, and referred to as a "Banana Republic." I was exposed to the reason as soon as I went to Panama City's Customs building with a borrowed pickup truck to retrieve the household gear we had shipped ahead. After I presented my papers, the customs official looked across the warehouse and pointed out the pallet with our belongings, then put on a long face. "Ah," he sighed. "It will probably take a week to inspect it all." "A week!" I exclaimed. "My papers are in order, I've got a truck outside, and my wife and children need those things today." Then I understood. "Perhaps I've missed one of the fees that are necessary?" I asked politely. "Would \$20 cover it?" His eyes brightened, and he replied, "As our General Torrijos has said, 'He who gives love receives love.' Over his shoulder, he called to his workers, "Pepe, José! Put that pallet on his truck." "Welcome to Panama," I quietly said to myself. Corruption was an acceptable way of life in certain sectors of their society, and we would see it many times during our six years in the country.

I was hired by the Panamanian Institute of Natural Resources (INRENARE) as consultant to the newly created National Park Service and counterpart to the director. The project was funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to ensure that the watershed of the Panama Canal was protected for the continued operations of interoceanic shipping. Soon after arriving in my new post, it became clear that I worked for Panama, and there was considerable animosity among the "Zonians." These were U.S. citizens who were born and raised in the Panama Canal Zone, who believed that I had betrayed the cause of retaining the Canal for America.

One of my new national park team's first tasks was to take over

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the ex-Canal Zone lands and establish the “Soberania” (i.e., Sovereignty) National Park. Resented by the Zonians, and with poor, landless Panamanians pressing against the tropical rainforest boundaries and becoming agricultural squatters, the park director, Raoul Fletcher, and I had our hands full.

While patrolling one afternoon, we discovered a newly opened jeep road into the park’s tropical forest and followed it to where we came upon a Panamanian military platoon and a large bulldozer. Incensed, Raoul hopped from our jeep and confronted the lieutenant, informed him that they were inside the national park, and emphatically ordered him to stop the illegal road construction. Eight nearby privates stopped to watch the exchange. The lieutenant told us he had orders to build the road, but Fletcher didn’t back down, and shouted that they had to leave immediately. The lieutenant’s next move was decisive. “Listos! Apunten!” (Ready! Aim!). The eight men immediately unslung their rifles, cocked, and aimed at Raoul and me. Then I spoke for the first time in this encounter. “Lieutenant, there has apparently been a misunderstanding. Forgive us, please. We’ll be leaving now.” I gave Raoul one of those sidelong looks that implies “Don’t open your mouth again!” The lieutenant had saved face in front of his men and ordered them to stand down. Raoul and I walked slowly back to our vehicle, got in, and drove away. It would not be the first or last time that the Panamanian military ignored the country’s national park law to extract precious timber or other resources when they found it convenient.

It was an honor to work with Panama’s fledgling park service to establish many new protected areas, especially the ones declared as UNESCO Biosphere Reserves due to their natural and cultural resources. Panama has not only conserved an incredible array of biological diversity in these reserves, but it has also respectfully protected the territories of rainforest, where indigenous groups have lived for millennia.

After four years with INRENARE, I was offered a new consultant contract for two years with the Kuna people. Their territory extends along the northeastern slope of Panama’s Continental Divide

to the coastal Caribbean Islands; basically from outside the port city of Colón to the Colombian border. The Kuna have a strong oral tradition, and can recount events such as the Great Flood, the day Columbus first landed on their shores, and their fight for independence from Spanish invaders, whose influences, in the form of Panamanian culture, they still resist today.

The Kuna opened my eyes to an indigenous view of the world as their garden, with them as the gardeners. They believe Kuna people were born from Mother Earth and are intimately linked to all living plants, animals, and the spirits (called *ponikana*) which inhabit the land and water. To them, rain is the Great Spirit making love to Mother Earth. The tropical rainforest and Caribbean Sea are the sources of their economic life. A tribal elder once asked me the prices of my house, car, food, medicine, and other commodities, then proceeded to educate me how his thatched home, sailboat, food, pharmaceuticals, etc. were all free because they came from the land, water, sky, and sun. "I am a rich man," he declared. Indeed, he was.

My work with the Kuna was to establish a defensible boundary between their tribal lands and the oncoming slash-and-burn agriculture and cattle ranching from the Panamanian side of the mountains. Our team of Kuna cartographers and volunteers from their island communities cut a swath along their border, posted, and patrolled it against illegal incursions. The only impediment was when a peasant farmer would show us his permit, signed by a Panamanian colonel, indicating he had ownership to the land he cleared, even though it was on Kuna territory. My Kuna counterparts contested such claims with Panama's Ministry of Justice but gained little satisfaction due, once again, to corrupt military. General Manuel Noriega had become the dictator, and drug-running, money laundering, arms trafficking, selling tropical hardwoods, and other illicit activities had become his and his cronies' businesses.

During the same time, stopping tropical deforestation in Central America was in vogue with U.S. conservationists, and it was easy to communicate the Kuna's cause to the media. However, it did have its consequences. One evening, as I drove home from the Kuna

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field station on the mountainous Continental Divide, two Panamanian soldiers stopped my vehicle when I reached the Pan-American Highway. They asked for my papers, as one shined a flashlight in my eyes and the other pointed his rifle at me. I had international diplomatic immunity, so I was more angry than afraid but kept silent as they slowly reviewed my documents. Finally, they handed them back, and warned me, “You need to be careful out here at night; it can be dangerous.”

A military source, who was a friend, informed me a few days later that Noriega wondered who had gotten those “little Kuna people” into *The New York Times*, and that I was being watched by the D-2 Military Intelligence Unit. The same day, Katherine and I had a conversation about leaving Panama as soon as possible. The U.S. invaded a year and a half later in 1989 to remove Noriega.

In my final months in Panama, I consulted to the Conservancy’s International Program to create the successful non-profit National Association for the Conservation of Nature (ANCON), which played a vital role in protecting the national parks after USAID funding terminated. Our pending departure from Panama corresponded with the Conservancy’s need to hire a protected areas expert in their Washington, D.C., office, and I was asked to come for an interview.

As I reviewed the Conservancy information on the American Airlines flight north, the fellow across the aisle asked if I worked for them. “No, but I’m headed for an interview,” I replied. We fell into an easy conversation about what remaining natural areas needed to be saved in Latin America and the Caribbean. I removed the airlines map and drew circles around many of the large areas, from Patagonia to Mexico, as he queried me about their conservation values. As we deplaned, he introduced himself as David Younkman, a member of the Conservancy Latin American team. Dave and I would soon design the Parks in Peril program, in large measure based on that airplane map and a good conversation. He is still a good friend.

In my new position as Director for International Stewardship at the Conservancy, a very astute board member, Cliff Messinger, asked me if I knew what it would take to “lifeboat” threatened parks

and reserves in Latin America . “No,” I quipped, “but if you can find me some walking-around money and give me six months, I’ll have a response.” “You’re on,” he replied. Within three months, our small team had logged tens of thousands of airline miles meeting with directors of national park services throughout the Latin American and Caribbean regions, reviewed maps and scientific reports, and designed a strategy to secure U.S. congressional appropriations. Initially, we identified 200 places, and named the program Parks in Peril. Our formula was simple: establish on-site protection, integrate the protected areas into the economic and cultural lives of local communities, and create long-term funding mechanisms to sustain local management.

I appreciated the opportunity to have led the design and manage the Parks in Peril program, along with many Conservancy colleagues and partner organizations, for its first ten years, from 1990 to 2000. The program lasted for 17 years, operating in 45 protected areas, totaling 44.8 million acres in 18 countries, with 200 partner organizations, with a direct investment of \$105 million. Finally, many places were set aside as gardens, and those gardens had gardeners.

September 11, 2001, changed our world with the attacks on the World Trade Towers in New York City, and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. September 11 is also my birthday, and having 3,000 people die the same day was profoundly saddening for me, and is now an annual day of reflection to contemplate my purpose in life. It is gratifying to have had the opportunity to live in some of the most beautiful places in our hemisphere, working to conserve our natural world, rather than for destructive forces of life.

Post-9/11, it was immediately apparent that U.S. interests in the world had shifted away from conservation in Latin America to a war footing in Afghanistan and the Middle East in general. It was time for me, professionally and personally, to transition away from international conservation and return to a U.S. domestic position. In 2002, I became the executive director of the Adirondack Council, and moved to the 6 million-acre park in northern New York.

The Adirondack Park has been contested terrain for over 150

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years, since the establishment of the “Forever Wild” Forest Preserve, when large tracts of land were permanently protected by the New York State Constitution. In 1974, the creation of the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) further exacerbated the conflicts between development interests of local communities and environmental organizations pushing for more preservation and stricter land-use regulations. The Adirondack Council was created at the same time to advocate for the fledgling APA, and became a target of community animosity. The situation had not changed significantly over the intervening years as I took over my new position.

In 2005, Lani Ulrich, then-director of a non-profit economic development organization, asked J.R. Risley, supervisor of the Town of Inlet, and me to meet. It was an attempt to overcome decades of conflict in the Adirondacks. When I asked Lani what the agenda was, she produced one question: “Can we find solutions that benefit Adirondack communities, their economies, and the environment?” That question has given rise to the Common Ground Alliance, a group of over 150 Adirondack citizens dedicated to finding those solutions and speaking to our legislators in Albany with one voice to accomplish positive changes to our region. I am proud to have been a co-founder of a regional movement which has changed the tenor of the debate from conflict to compromise, and from viewing the Forest Preserve as an imposition to seeing it as an opportunity. We have accomplished this effort at a time when our national political debates are more polarized and unable to address major environmental challenges, social and economic inequality, and the loss of our democratic leadership around the world.

I will leave you with a metaphor about what may lie ahead by looking backwards. During the Medieval Ages, European people spent hundreds of years and all the excess capital in their societies to build Gothic cathedrals, the architectural flowers of the time. Why? Because they believed in God, heaven, and hell, and that they would get to heaven if they bought indulgences. Today, our architectural wonders are multinational corporate headquarters. Why? Because we believe in the dollar, free markets, global capitalism, and that

unrestrained profit is good. Both of these examples demonstrate how societal values drive outcomes.

So, what values must we have as societies so that the next cathedrals are green and blue, and celebrate all the life we share in this garden we call Earth? A Dene shaman in Canada had an answer: “Water, and every living thing that depends upon it, is sacred. Heal the waters, and all else will improve too.” We are getting back to the Garden and beginning a new Age of Restoration.