

Dieter Steiner: The City and the Wilderness

Dieter Steiner has written books about John Muir and Rachel Carson, two pioneers of nature conservation and ecosystem protection. John Muir is regarded as the founder of the National Parks movement, initiating the declaration of the Yosemite National Park in California. He pledged its landscape to the “University of the Wilderness”. He saw nature as being “at war with civilisation” and once wrote that urban people were “all more or less sick: not a perfectly sane man in San Francisco”. He argued for the protection of wild areas, preservation of pristine landscapes, and conservation as the moderate use of natural resources. To get the National Park created he had to allow visitors to Yosemite. Today four million people a year visit Yosemite, 90 percent of them coming by car. Most however stay in the valley, but some 50,000 using the hiking trails into wilder areas.

This retreat from the urban rat-race to the soothing effect on natural scenery is a form of what E.O.Wilson calls “biophilia”. This notion of socio-biology implies that there is some genetic programming, as in other animals, of our reactions to our environment. However it can also be argued that our upbringing in cities leads to “biophobia”, a fear and loathing of the natural and wild, of dense vegetation and rugged scenery. City children can be frightened in unfamiliar natural environments.

On the other hand Rachel Carson argued that every child has a sense of wonder and seeks to explore and understand nature. However, the urban child tends to lose some of that sense of wonder as she or he grows up. A child needs an adult companion who shows them things in nature, explains what is happening and allows the child to touch and feel as a way of experiencing the environment.

Opportunities for contact with nature in cities are growing. Frankfurt’s green belt contains an old military airfield that has been restored to “nature”. The western part of the airfield is reserved for nature and the ecological evolution back towards a type of “wilderness” is being

studied in detail¹. Dieter Steiner asked whether this is the way to sustain wilderness in the future. He pointed out that while there are 757 designated “wilderness” areas in the USA, there are few in Europe, although European bison can be found in the “Monts d’Azur” refuge in France. He argues that “Western society is approaching a cracking point: if the wilderness without (the real wild environment) is lost, the wilderness within (our human desire for the experience of the wild) will collapse”.

Discussion

Children in urban areas are deprived of some wilderness experience because of the way open spaces are designed and controlled. Urban wilderness has to be made to work as urban children want to interact with nature, to explore, feel and touch wild creatures, from the bugs in the soils and under rotting logs to the birds on lakes and rivers.



¹ See [http://frankfurt.de/sixcms/detail.php?id=2805&_ffmpar_id_inhalt\]=50983](http://frankfurt.de/sixcms/detail.php?id=2805&_ffmpar_id_inhalt]=50983) for more.