

Special Earth Day Edition



Heartwood Path Newsletter



Earth Day 2020: A New Time For Sarsaparilla

My involvement in protecting the environment began during the same year as the nation's first environmental teach-in. As such, this anniversary, marking fifty years, is very significant to me.

In 1970, after three juvenile tree-planting efforts—the first one in Cahokia, Illinois, the second one in Clayton, Missouri, and the third one in Fairview Heights, Illinois—my conservation efforts took a jump in significance when, in high school, as president of the ecology club, I started and ran the city's

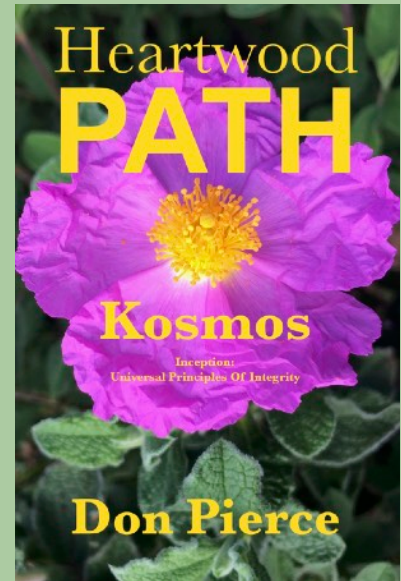


recycling center, organized an all-night earth vigil, temporarily converted the large marble globe sculpture in front of the school into a fake huge “population bomb,” and went to the International Wildlife Federation’s world conference in Mexico City.

There, my involvement took a second leap in significance. My purpose in going to Mexico City was to secure an endorsement of a conservation tax in Missouri. Between the interesting sessions, I read a book that was a big seller at the time: The Environmental Handbook, edited by Garret DeBell. I was hooked. My boyhood interests finally had a name—environmentalism.

Before going to this conference, my mother told me not to eat anything raw in Mexico. During the first night, I dutifully left my dinner salad alone. My avoidance of the salad attracted the attention of the senior Missouri delegate, Ed Stegner. “Aren’t you going to eat your salad, Don? If, not, hand it over.” I did, and, after the evening programs, retired to my room, where I continued to read the Environmental Handbook. The next day, at lunch, Ed explained his gastric difficulties and asked me if I had ever heard of Montezuma's revenge (I hadn’t). Ed looked as green as the cause we were shepherding.

I found out about the conference in Mexico City because I had a subscription to National Wildlife magazine. It was in that magazine that three years earlier I read, sometime during my thirteen year, that the Sierra Club had fired its executive director David Brower. The author described Brower as a giant in the emerging environmental movement. I remember being outraged at Dave’s dismissal (he opposed nuclear power when most of the Sierra Club’s board members supported it, and he spent



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too much money and lost the Club's important tax-exempt status during his efforts to save the Grand Canyon). Years later, the Club gave Brower its highest award. He, who has done more for the preservation of nature than anyone else, correctly recognized that the Club could always raise more money, but it could never replace the Grand Canyon.

Of all the writings in the Environmental Handbook, the one that struck me the most was called, "A Time For Sarsaparilla," by David Brower. Here is an excerpt that demonstrates Dave's wisdom and eloquence:

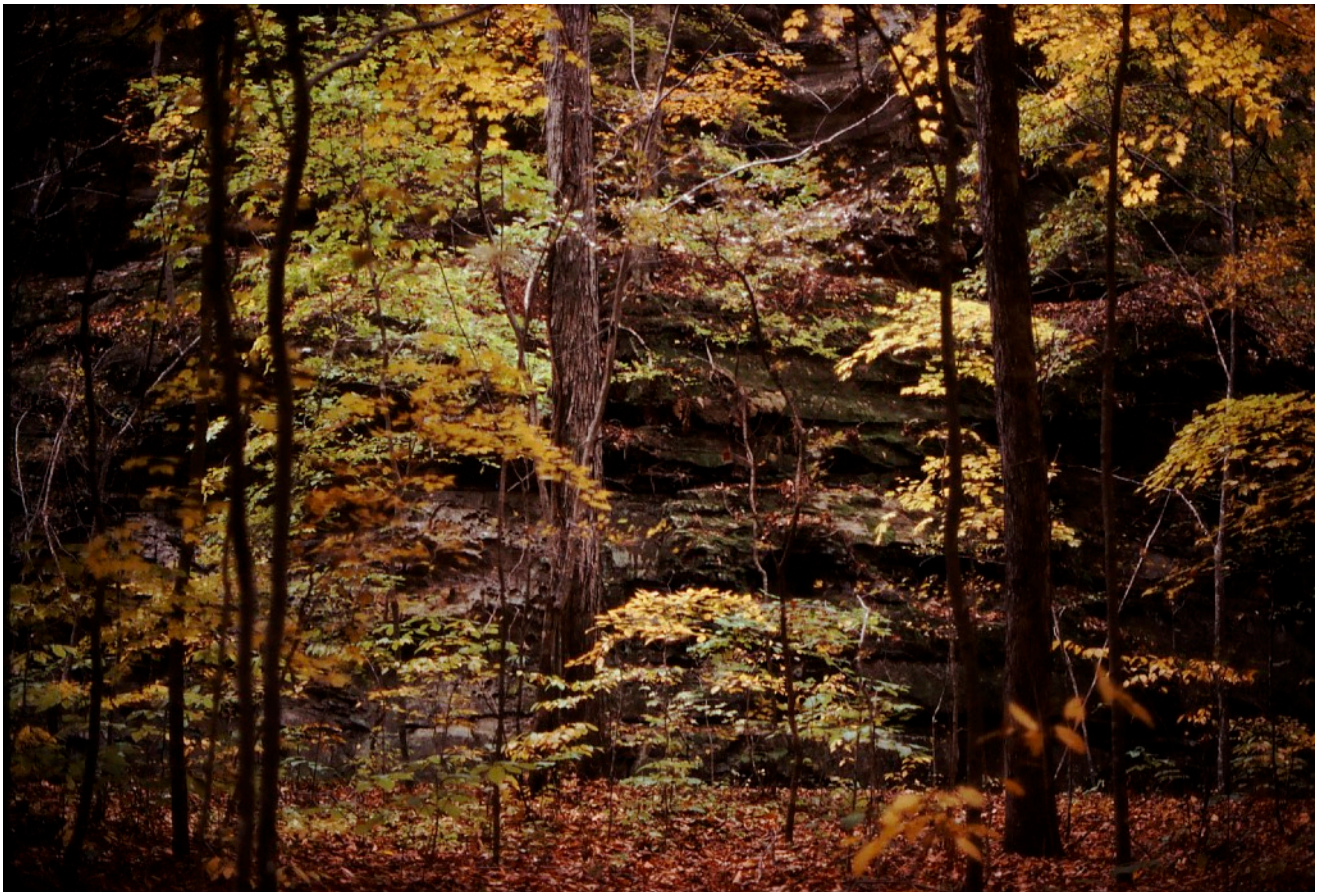
"There may yet be, in the untrammelled tenth of America, enough nature, unsecond-guessed by technological arrogance, to build a good future on. We must hope so, and treasure what we have. Not to make mass sandboxes out of it, or Lake Powell's, or highway and helicopter havens, but places where... we perceive instead of just looking, where we listen a little and talk less, where we consider our beginnings and our beyondings, where we learn to absorb, and to respect and love and remember."

Moments after reading that passage for the first time, I was thrilled to see on the conference program that Brower was scheduled to be a keynote speaker. Hours before his address, Dave came up to me, introduced himself, and marveled at my young age relative to all of the other participants. He mentioned me in his speech, saying that my presence at the conference gave him hope for the future success of the conservation movement.

Three years later, while presiding over the ecology club at the University of Missouri, I arranged to have Dave speak on campus in Columbia, Missouri. After the speech, over beers at the local Heidelberg bar, Dave asked who was doing the most in town to protect the environment. Virtually everyone pointed to me. Dave remembered me from Mexico City and asked about my current involvement. I told him I was fighting dams in the Midwest. He told me that as soon as I killed Missouri's Meramec dam, he would hire me to work at his new organization, Friends of the Earth. Curiously, prior to that moment, it never dawned on me that we would actually be able to stop the dam and, once done, that I'd be looking for work.

The next few years mark a third jump in the significance of my conservation efforts. Too boring and self-serving to list all of it here, suffice it to say that I participated in the building of the legislative safety net for the environment, both federally and at the state level. I led the effort to stop billions of dollars of ill-conceived projects, including dams and nuclear power plants. And I led efforts that resulted in the protection of tens of millions of acre of wildness, from Missouri to Alaska.

There were particular places I wanted to save, and I saw it happen. I met all of the conservation goals I established for myself back in high school. I thank everyone who worked along with me to make it all happen.



Then came two problematic developments:

First. Prior to 1994, I was too naïve to know that what I was achieving was impossible. After that time, I was enough of a seasoned environmental leader to know that proposed campaigns would be difficult at best and, at worst, impossible to achieve. It was time to turn over leadership to people green enough to muddle through, to do

great things at impossible odds, I was no longer a vitally needed naïve, amateur conservationist— like the ones who built the movement and will sustain it. I am pleased to report that I have never told a prospective, less experienced leader not to take on a hopeless campaign. We still need to find ways to win too many of those.

Second. The United States 1994 Senate election brought conservatives into power in Washington D.C. This led to changes in the leadership of the committees that I would need to advance legislation on future campaigns. In too many ways, I had nowhere to go; or, at least no way to get there. I vowed to find a new course. I thought that we simply could not allow such poor electoral choices to further decimate environment protections.

Then that old passage from Brower's Environmental Handbook offering came back into my mind. Suddenly, I knew what he meant when he said that we will need to, "perceive instead of just looking, where we listen a little and talk less, where we consider our beginnings and our beyondings, where we learn to absorb, and to respect and love and remember."

That part of that sentence led me to a new strategy. Instead of only saving the world one place of the time, I would henceforth work also to save the world one human mind at a time.

But how to do it? My environment and political science education and my years of activist experience did not give me all that I needed. So I got a Master's degree in social work (social workers do the bulk of all psychotherapy). I also spent the next twenty-six years researching and writing about how to, as I put it "awaken to the nature of happiness," culminating in the 2020 release of the first three of nine Heartwood Path books.

Bringing the eco-psychology approach to public attention is my next, and perhaps last, big jump in the significance of my work. Give me a call if you want to benefit from what I have learned, or if you just want to see what it's all about. I promise not to squelch any of your unrealistic but vitally important ways to participate. I look forward to hearing from you.

-Don Pierce



SUSTAINABILITY

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“From April 22, the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, to April 24, activists, performers, thought leaders, and artists will come together for an empowering, inspiring, and communal three day livestream mobilization.

The fights against the coronavirus and the climate crisis go hand-in-hand, and as we work to flatten the curve of this pandemic, we must strive toward the longer term goal of building a society rooted in sustainability and justice.”

Go to <https://www.earthdaylive2020.org> to find out more and to join the Livestream of the events.