

Confessions of a Rebound Romantic**R. Bruce Hull*****Infinite Nature*, Chicago Press 2006**

I'm a rebound romantic. I once was blindly in love with nature—romantically and lustfully in love. I immersed myself in the deep waters and penetrating solitude of wilderness lakes at the border between Minnesota and Canada, bushwhacked through dense rhododendron forests up steep Appalachian Mountains in pursuit of sunsets, and lost hours meditating on changing colors deep within the Grand Canyon. I opened windows to let flies escape and did not fish for sport because I found no pleasure in causing fish pain. I followed a vegetarian diet, took short showers, turned off lights, and faithfully recycled all materials my community allowed. I tried to take only memories and leave only footprints. But I was painfully aware that by living my life, I created trails in wilderness, trash in dumps, and carbon in the atmosphere. I felt guilty about being human and destroying the nature I loved.

The guilt grew as I took advantage of life's opportunities to travel the world and raise a family. I had to ignore or suppress this guilt in order to stay sane while leading a professional, middle-class American lifestyle. I knowingly became a hypocrite. I stocked bathrooms in my old but sturdy wood house with ample supplies of soft, clean toilet paper. I drove a car to work more often than I biked. I drank imported beer in nonreturnable bottles. I started eating steak again, and I liked it. On cold snowy days, I appreciated the warmth and comfort of my oil-fired furnace. I flew to conferences, drove on holidays to visit family members, and surfed the Web.

As I struggled with being a hypocrite, it soon dawned on me that I also was a bigamist. I loved both nature and culture. I'd been captivated by fine music and literature, mesmerized by Michelangelo's *David*, and awed by the Great Wall of China. I loved sipping fine wine at Australian vineyards and strolling dreamily through the tended Tuscan landscapes. I eagerly enriched my life with friends and ideas from around the world and marvel at the beauty and integrity humans create.

The first part of my professional career focused on the study, management, and protection of romantic experiences in nature. I taught in landscape architecture and natural resource recreation programs, conducted studies in natural areas, and developed methods to assess and legitimize public preferences for nature. Then, with the pressures of establishing a career and family behind me, and awareness of my hypocrisy and bigamy in front of me, I sought to resolve some contradictions in my life.

As a good romantic, I looked to nature for lessons. Pillars of U.S. environmentalism such as Thoreau, Leopold, and Muir found inspiration and guidance in nature, so I searched for answers in wild places and in the scientific studies of nature. I was disappointed to find no absolutes, only qualifications. Rather than an inspiring nature that knew best and could help me establish priorities and defend values, I learned about a dynamic and capricious nature. I found deep divisions and intense debate among my natural science colleagues over issues I had taken for granted: biodiversity is good, ecosystems have integrity, forests have health, species are entities, and naturalness can be defined. And I confronted the dark side to eco-philosophy that promotes fascism, social Darwinism, and misanthropy. Where Muir found humility and interconnectedness, Hitler found genocide and brutality.

I felt like my lover had abandoned me. If nature really was dynamic, capricious, and arbitrary, then perhaps I could be too. My guilt began to ease and my embrace of things cultural grew; clearly I was on the rebound from a shattered relationship and needed to be careful of new infatuations. I remained uneasy about my inability to judge environmental policies and evaluate alternative development scenarios. In what environment did I want to live? What environmental qualities should I advocate? How could I defend my preferences? I had so many more questions than answers that I soon felt more helpless than guilty. My most troubling realization was that I could not define or defend the nature I had loved. What was my lover? A fantasy? An expectation? A social construction?

My tools and training failed to help me make sense of these questions, so I redirected my professional career and began studying environmental debates and land-use planning efforts. I wanted to learn how others were resolving life's contradictions. Obviously many people had strong opinions (as evidenced by negotiation train wrecks, endless litigation of land-use plans, and heated scholarly debates about the nature of nature). I interviewed scores of people—some experts, some not—about their environmental preferences and concerns. I found that most people were at least as confused as I, and often became visibly anxious when my questions penetrated through their deep-seated beliefs and assumptions about nature and about humanity's relationship to nature.

Why is nature so elusive a lover? Why did I struggle defining it, justifying its existence, explaining my values for it, and figuring out how I should relate to it? Why do we as a society have such a hard time finding agreement on essential questions about the environmental conditions we want for ourselves and our descendants? The answer, I now suspect, is because environmental fundamentalism traps us in narrow, self-reinforcing, and polarizing debates. Actively pluralizing nature provided me the means to overcome these fundamentalist traps. Hope of deliberation and discourse replaced the helplessness of polarization and paralysis. Optimism about finding common ground replaced the negativity of pointing out differences. I rebounded back into a relationship with many natures. This book describes my journey toward pluralizing nature. I wrote it as a means to help understand and inventory some natures that can, have, and might exist.

The book's intended audience is everyone who cares about living in thriving and sustainable communities. That should include you. It certainly includes environmental professionals, environmental scientists, environmentalists, community leaders, politicians, and anyone else involved with or responsible for determining the environmental qualities of our future.