

## \*Blog One: An Opening Gambit

The first blog post of, hopefully, many seems the hardest to write. The details aren't so full of devilment to me but stepping back to offer a forecast poses some difficulty.

This will be a blog devoted to “nature.” There is so much to say. I leave it to a long list of ideas and the whim of the moment to let an idea about nature emerge over time. So much of natural processes occurs in this way, as self-organizing and re-organizing systems within environmental constraints and opportunities.

“Self-organize”? Yes. What we perceive as the messiness of natural landscapes really comes from the combination of organizing principles of different sorts. Plants of one species in a group have “personal space” to assure that they benefit from each other (pollination, re-seeding, shade, soil chemistry) without too much competition for resources (soil nutrients, sunlight, water). Scrape a patch of ground bare and watch what happens.

(You don't have to do any of this, because it already happens around us every day, in abandoned quarries, center-city sidewalks, the edges and interiors of farm fields suburban developments, reconstructed ecosystems, remnant habitats, and urban parks). Watch nature reorganize and come back, often muted, but sometimes with a vengeance. The very idea of “nature” at work here will do the same: shift, go in and out of focus, move at lightning speed and sit still, seem clear and muddled, sometimes all at once.

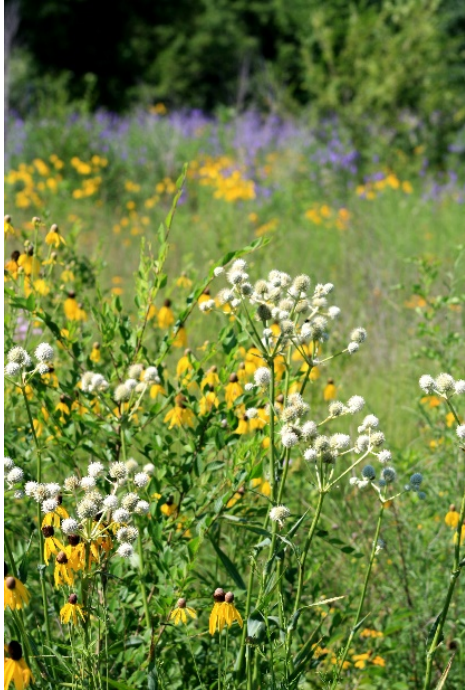


Undoubtedly “human nature” will be a subtopic or even a main issue somewhere on the way. It always hangs as the backdrop, as the “nature” I intend to describe has been changed forever by our presence. There are surviving stories about how the earth and humans’ place on it was created in the past, as the body of Changing Woman, a Garden of Eden, a series of worlds that are transformed by humans and our ancestors. In every case, these are stories about change, told through human understandings.

We, as humans, are at once able to change the natural world to the extreme, and yet we exemplify our animal (and plant?) ancestry at the same time, using language and symbols. We interact with our surroundings not only with our language and limbs, but also our imaginations.



Are we different from the other life forms on the planet? Or are we just another of those life forms? I'm not sure it's one or the other, and to the degree we deny one part, the more that part becomes a problem for ourselves and the planet. These are questions I ask of myself, too. What is my animal/mammal/species/individual "nature"?



(Chimpanzees, one of Darwin's finches, fox squirrels, foxes, and many other species use tools or display childish play behaviors. I watched a young squirrel have a mock fight with a stick that seemed to be a nest mate in its imagination. Noted chimpanzee researcher Richard Wrangham told my younger daughter and I a story about a young chimp who played most of a day with a short piece of log, putting it down at nap time in its nest and treating it like an infant chimp.)

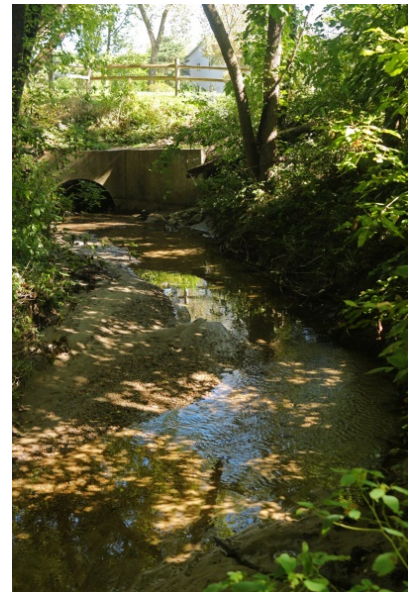
What subject matter might you find in one or another of these posts? There is that long list, but frankly it looks rather boring and nerdy. I hope to make the topics livelier than the list conveys. With permission, I may write about projects in restoration I've encountered or assisted among private landowners and public stewards. And I will take suggestions, too, probably down the metaphoric road a bit, or once we ford a few rivers together, or climb some tall trees for a panoramic view.

Some initial ideas are:

Ecoservices: what benefits does the relatively unchanged or restored world of nature offer us? In other words, why should we care more about the natural world, at least selfishly?

What kinds of wetlands exist in Iowa, and what goes on in them that distinguishes them? It goes without saying (just to juice the topic a bit) that sex is essential: plant sex and animal sex (along with asexual reproduction), but so also are the sources of water and nutrients, the kinds of plants, and much more.

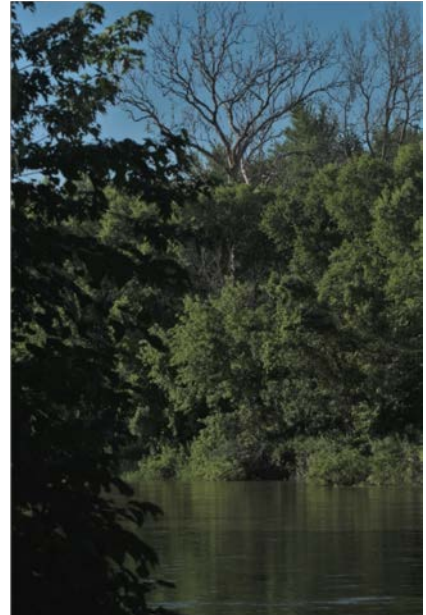
Urban stream syndrome is a degraded condition of the creeks and rivers in our cities, from garbage dumping to long stretches of culvert where a creek once flowed. What are the features of the syndrome, and can be done to bring these waterways back to a healthier natural state, especially with a disregarding, trash-loving, two-legged, and irrationally dominant species in the neighborhood?



Speaking of streams, Iowa's are diverse in form and the life in them, and yet they have suffered from the same problem for decades: too much water, coming too quickly. That's a very simple way to talk about the hydrology of altered streams, and I'll try to keep the fancy part simple. Still, I hope you'll pick up a better understanding of stream processes and maybe a little new vocabulary to help you express your understanding.

As an old song says, "Everybody's talkin' 'bout a new way of walkin'..." and the new walk is "biodiversity." What does it mean? Why is it important? We all love monarch butterflies and polar bears, right? But what about non-charismatic living things, like algae mats, bacterial films, lawnmower mushrooms, left-handed snails, and wedge beetles? Are earthworms even lovable in any sense? Cockroaches? Bacteria? What gives?*(continues below)*

You don't have to lichen every fungus you see, but some lichens are downright beautiful, from five feet away and at 10x magnification. What is a lichen? Is it even a fungus? Did you know that the air you breathe is filled with the spores of lichens (and ferns and mosses and other life forms)? How else would they get a start on that tree you planted ten years ago? I guess you'll have to consider your own symbiotic relationships (with gut bacteria, for one) to appreciate these sometimes bright and sometimes dull splotches on concrete, tree bark, rock, and even the paint of junk cars.







And then there are the mosses! Sometimes dark, sometimes bright, often dull, occasionally shiny – on tree trunks, rotting logs, and soil, - they are everywhere, it seems, sometimes noticed and sometimes disliked. As plants, what are they about? Do they have sap? Why do they seem to shrivel up at times, then come to verdant life at others? Foxtail mosses, pocket mosses, tongue mosses.... Is it worth bothering?

I could go on with possible topics. I'm not sure I've convinced you to follow along, but I've tried, by asking questions that you might find enticing or challenging you to give some credence to cockroaches and earthworms, or by looking more closely at lichens and mosses. I've even suggested that there are problems in the world of nature, problems we might have caused and that we may have a hand in remedying.

Come along. Let's see where this takes us. If nothing else, it's a journey through some of the twists and turns of my worldview, and that alone could be worth it.

Lee Searles, January 2019