CARING FOR THE WOODS

Barry Lopez

Award-winning author Barry Lopez is a widely recognized and well respected nature writer. Among his many awards in both fiction and nonfiction, he is the recipient of a National Book Award, a Pushcart Prize, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Lopez is perhaps best known for such nonfiction works as *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in the Northern Landscape* (1986), *Of Wolves and Men* (1978), and *Crossing Open Ground* (1989). He has contributed to a number of magazines and newspapers, including *Harper's* where he served as a contributing editor, the *New York Times, Paris Review, Orion,* and *Audubon Magazine,* where the essay reprinted here originally appeared in 1995.

SUGGESTION FOR READING Lopez traces both his family history and a brief cultural history of the area in his essay about the importance of caring for the woods. As you read, keep track of those two histories and pay attention to how they figure into Lopez's views on land development and the preservation of wild places. You can do this either by underlining and making annotations in the margins or by keeping notes.

1 My family has been in the Americas for almost five centuries. Marín López, a shipwright on my father's side, was in the Caribbean with Cortés in 1511. My mother's English and German ancestors began farming on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River valley in the 1650s. A scion of that group later moved to Virginia (where the Holston River still bears the family name); his progeny moved into the Carolinas and eastern Alabama, where my mother was born on a plantation in 1914. One relative in that clan moved on to New Mexico at the close of the 19th century and then dropped from sight. He is recalled as a man obsessed with killing Indians.

My father's family, originally tobacco farmers in Cuba, eventually came to St. Louis and New York as tobacco merchants, though they maintained close ties with Asturias, their homeland in northern Spain. Neither the Romans nor the Moors, my father is still proud to say, ever conquered Asturias. He traces his lineage there back to Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar—El Cid. In her last years my mother followed her own path back as far, to a baron of Somerset who ratified the Magna Carta at Runnymede.

All these centuries later, the wandering, the buying up, the clearing, the planting, and the harvesting of land in my single branch of the family has come down to a parcel in Oregon: 35 acres of mixed old-growth forest, rising quickly into the foothills of the Cascade Mountains from the north bank of the McKenzie River. These woods harbor Roosevelt elk and mountain lion, suites of riparian and mixed-forest birds, and an assortment of insects, wildflowers, and mushrooms that trails off into a thousand species.

I understand the desire to own the land, the dream of material wealth that brought each of my lines of descent to the Americas. I respect the determination, the tenacity, and the uses to which the land-profit was put—formal education, for example. But I've come to believe, at the age of 49, that sacrificing the biological integrity of land to abet human progress is a practice my generation must end. If we do not, I believe the Americas will finally wash into the sea like Haiti, leaving behind a social nightmare.

5 My wife, Sandra, and I have lived on the right bank of the river for 24 years. We want to keep this single wooded slope of land in the West undeveloped and uncut. We want to pass it on like a well-read book, not the leavings of someone's meal.

The enormous trees and the river, because of their scale, dominate what we see here, but

the interstices of this landscape are jammed with life: hummingbirds, spiders, butterflies, cutthroat trout, wild ginger, skinks, the cascading blossoms of wild rhododendron. In the 1940s some of the larger trees—Douglas fir, western hemlock, and western red cedar, four to six feet in diameter—were selectively logged. The selective logging and a fire that burned a long stretch of the north bank of the McKenzie in 1855 created a forest with a few tall, rotting stumps; dense patches of younger Douglas fir; and several dozen massive, isolated, towering trees, 300 to 400 years old, all standing among many fewer Pacific yew, chinquapin, bigleaf maple, red alder, Pacific dogwood, California hazel, and the odd Pacific madrone.

In 1989 a neighbor who owned this slope put 32 acres of it up for sale. Timber companies that intended to clear-cut the property were the most active bidders, and Sandra and I were forced to match money and wits with them. But in 1990 we were able to add these acres to three we'd bought in 1976. We then completed a legal arrangement to prevent the land from being either logged or developed after we passed away. Good intention toward an individual stretch of land has now become well-meaning of another kind in my family.

We did not set out to preserve these woods. From the start we felt it a privilege, also a kind of wonder, to live here. Twenty-inch spring chinook spawn on a redd in front of the house in September every year. Wild bleeding heart, yellow violets, white flowers such as trillium and wood sorrel, and the red flowers of coralroot are brilliant in the deep, green woods in April and May. I find bear scat, beaver-clipped willows, and black-tailed deer prints regularly on my walks. On the same night we've listened to northern spotted owls, western screech owls, and northern saw-whet owls call. Spotted skunks and a short-tail weasel have tried to take up residence in the house. On summer nights, when we leave the windows open, bats fly through.

From a certain perspective, this wooded hill with its unnamed creek and marvelous creatures—I nearly stepped on a rubber boa one morning on the way to the toolshed—is still relatively unmanipulated; but I try not to let myself be fooled by the thought. The number of songbirds returning each spring I would guess to be half what it was a decade ago. The number of chinook on the redd, though it fluctuates, has also fallen off in recent years. And I've taken hundreds of dead animals off the road along the river—raccoon, brush rabbit, even Steller's jay and mink. People new to the area are apt to log the few Douglas firs left on their property, to roll out fresh lawns and plant ornamental trees in their place. Their house cats leave shrews, white-footed mice, and young birds strewn in the woods like so much litter.

10 Driftnets that snag salmon in the far-off Pacific, industrial logging in Central America that eliminates migratory-bird habitat, speeding trucks and automobiles, attractive prices for timber—all of it directly affects these acres. There is no way to fence it out.

The historical detail that might make vivid what, precisely, occurred in the McKenzie River valley after its location in 1812 by Donald MacKenzie—a trapper and kinsman of the Canadian explorer Alexander MacKenzie—is hard to come by, but the story is similar to those told of a hundred other valleys in the West. Beaver trappers were the first whites to sleep in these woods. (Molala and Kalapuya Indians, from the east and west side of the Cascades respectively, apparently camped along the McKenzie in summer, when salmon were running and openings in the heavily forested mountains were crowded with ripening blue and red huckleberries, soft thimbleberries, strawberries, orange salmonberries, blue and red elderberries, and trailing blackberries.) When the free trappers and the company trappers were gone, gold and silver miners filtered in. Toward the end of the 19th century some homestead settlement followed small-scale logging operations along the river,

though steep mountains and dense forests made farming and grazing in the area impractical. Clear-cutting in modern times, with its complicated attendant problems—siltation smothering salmon redds, "predator control" programs directed against black bears—has turned the road between our house and Eugene, 40 miles downriver, into as butchered a landscape as any I know in the Cascades.

In the 1980s, when the price of Douglas fir reached $300 for 1,000 board feet, some small-property owners succumbed—two or three trees might bring them $2,500. The resulting harvest has grown to look like mange on the hills. Hand in hand with that has come real estate promotion, the hundreds of FOR SALE signs along the road a sort of Muzak.

I am not a cynical man, but watching the quick spread of suburban logging and seeing the same house put up for sale every few years—with a little more landscaping, a higher fence, and another $30,000 to $40,000 added to the price—pushes me closer to it than anything else I know. A long-term commitment to the place, knowledge of its biological limits, or concern for the valley's fate—these do not appear to be a part of the transactions. The hacking away at natural growth, the incessant prettifying with rosebushes and trimmed hedges, and the imposition of incongruous antebellum architecture look like a scatter of bad marriages—reigning husbands with presentable wives.

If I had answers to these problems, or if I felt exempt in this mess, I would be angry about it more often than I am. As it is, Sandra and I pace ourselves. We work on initiatives to control real estate development and rein in logging along the river. We provide a place for the release of rehabilitated raptors, including spotted owls. We work amicably with the state highway department and the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), which maintain corridors across the land we occupy. We have had to threaten a lawsuit to curb the recklessness of the highway department with chainsaws and heavy equipment, and we have had to insist through an attorney that the BPA not capriciously fell "danger trees" along its power-line right-of-way.

15 But these agencies, whose land-management philosophies differ so strikingly from our own, have slowly accommodated us. Instead of flooding the roadside with herbicides and flailing at it with oversize brush cutters, the highway department now permits us (and others along the river) to trim back by hand what brush actually threatens motor traffic. And the regional director of the BPA wrote into a recent contract that I could accompany his fallers, to be certain no felled tree was sent crashing needlessly into other trees.

Sandra and I ourselves, of course, have not left the place untouched. In January 1991 two windstorms felled about 30 trees. We logged them out with horses and put the money toward the land payment. I have felled standing dead trees that threatened the house. We compost our kitchen waste, laundry lint, and woodstove ashes in the woods. We've planted gardens and built outbuildings. But it is our habit to disturb these acres very little and to look after them in a way only humans can: by discouraging or preventing the destruction other humans bring. I've asked my neighbors to stop dumping refuse on our place. (They had done it for years because it was only "the woods," a sort of warehouse for timber, deer, and fish, and a dumping ground for whatever one wanted to abandon—cars, bedsprings, fuel drums, mall packaging.) I've asked another neighbor's children not to shoot at birds or chop down trees. I've asked unwitting fishermen not to walk through the salmon redd. And, reluctantly, I've gated and posted the land to keep out wanton hunters and people in four-wheel-drives looking for something to break down or climb over.

We know we cannot fence off the endangered chinook redd without attracting curious passersby. Neither I nor anyone can outlaw the product advertising (or foolish popular history) that contributes to images of men taming a violent West. Neither I nor anyone, I fear, can soon

change human sentiment to put lands that are unharvested, unhunted, unroaded, or untenanted on the same footing with lands that are domesticated or industrialized. So the birds and animals, the fish and spiders, the wild orchids and other flowers will not have these shields.

Piece by piece, however, as a citizen and as a writer, I want to contest the obsessions that I believe imperil American landscapes—the view that they are principally sources of material wealth or scenic backdrops for a more important human drama. I want to consider the anomalies that lie at the heart of our incessant desire to do good. And I want to see how to sidestep despair, by placing my faith in something larger than my own ideas.

Sandra and I know we do not own these 35 acres. The Oregon ash trees by the river, in whose limbs I have seen flocks of 100 Audubon's warblers, belong also to the families in Guatemala in whose forests these birds winter. The bereavement I feel at the diminishment of life around me is also a bereavement felt by men and women and children I don't know, living in cities I've never visited. And the exhilaration I experience seeing fresh cougar tracks in mud by a creek is an emotion known to any person in love who hears the one-who-is-loved speak.

20 There is more mystery to be contemplated, there are more lessons to be absorbed, on these 35 acres than all the people in my lineage going back to Runnymede and medieval Asturias could manage, should the study be pursued another 1,000 years. My generation's task, I believe, is to change the direction of Western civilization in order to make such a regard practicable.

When I rise in the morning I often walk down to the riverbank. If it's summer I'm likely to see mergansers, tree swallows, and osprey. I see first light brightly reflected on alder twigs stripped by beaver. I feel the night movement of cool air downriver and see deer-head orchid and blue gilia blooming in the dark-green salal and horsetail rushes.

I am acutely aware, winter or summer, that these waters have come from farther east in the mountains, that in a few days they will cross the bar at the mouth of the Columbia and become part of the Pacific. The ancient history alone of this river, this animate and elusive business of rain and snow and gravity, gives me hope.

Walking back to the house in this serene frame of mind, I know that to love life, to swear an allegiance to what is alive, is the essence of what I am after. I'm moved to forgive whoever does not find in these acres what I do. I glance into the moving picket of trees and shadow, alert for what I've never noticed before, in a woods I'm trying to take care of—as in its very complicated way it is taking care of me.

EXPLORATORY WRITING

Using the notes or annotations you made as you read the essay, write a brief summary of Lopez's argument and how he uses family history and cultural history to make that argument. How do those histories inform his decision to preserve as much of the woods as he can? Where does he position himself in these histories?

TALKING ABOUT THE READING

With a group of your classmates, make a chart in which you identify the stakeholders (both past and present) in Lopez's argument about how the woods should be used or taken care of. Under each person or group, list what is actually at stake in how the woods are used. Lopez and his wife, for example, could be called stakeholders. The trappers and different Indian tribes could be on your chart. Present your chart to the class for a discussion of what is actually at stake in the ways we use our forests or undeveloped natural spaces.