

The Once and Future World: Nature as it was, as it is, as it could be

By J. B. MacKinnon. 2013. Random House Canada, One Toronto Street, Unit 300, Toronto, ON, Canada, M5C 2V6. 256 pages, 29.95 CAD, Cloth.

The Once and Future World by J. B. MacKinnon, co-author of *The 100-Mile Diet: A Year of Local Eating*, is an eloquent and thought-provoking exploration of nature and our place in it. It addresses the roles humans play within the natural world, the influence we exert on its complex systems, and the relationships we develop with our natural surroundings. It really is a book about *Homo sapiens* in nature.

The book is also an invitation. MacKinnon invites us to stretch our thinking and our imaginations beyond common knowledge to envision a different world and future. He does so by blending personal narrative, scientific fact, historical discovery, recent events, case studies, speculation about the future, and sweeping questions that trigger reflection on where we are today and what we would like the world, and the place of

humans in it, to look like. Along the way, MacKinnon discusses a wide range of concepts, including the anthropocene, change blindness, shifting baselines, cascade effects, ecosystem services, relaxed selection, progress trap, double extinction, re-wilding, habitecure, and more.

“Nature is a confounding thing” he writes in the first chapter (page 8), illustrating throughout the book how our relationship with and within nature is equally perplexing. He offers particularly intriguing perspectives on the past – a past which is itself confounding and imperfect, filled with drama, story, extinction, human ‘progress’, forgetting and denial, resulting in what he calls a “10 percent world” offering only one-tenth of its former natural abundance. Accompanying the impoverishment of natural abundance is the loss of relation-

ships, knowledge and cultural practices relating to the natural world – a loss of nature from human social networks, as he puts it.

Yet this loss and gradual impoverishment was not a deliberate trajectory, but rather an incremental “taking” from the environment by different arrangements of people in different places at different points in history. All these ‘takings’, McKinnon adds, occurred with limited approval to degrade the environment, and subsequent adaptation to the consequences. Now, after many millennia, the accumulated impact of the consequences and adaptations is becoming increasingly clear.

Yet it is still a beautiful world, as the title of Chapter 5 suggests, and nature has a life and a vitality all its own – “always expressing itself in a weed poking up from a crack in the concrete” (page 9) – which shows us a way forward despite challenges which appear overwhelming. McKinnon identifies one major challenge as a lack of awareness regarding the natural world which surrounds us – from weeds in sidewalk cracks, to birds of prey hunting in urban parks, to ocean life returning to the waters of a popular beach after the holiday season. The nature we surround ourselves with shapes us as a species, he points out, adding that we tend to prefer wilder, more diverse environments. In that light, an important and overlooked result of conservation and ecological restoration efforts may be the recovery of a certain wildness within ourselves. In the context, furthermore, of challenges and limitations faced by nature conservation and ecological restoration – in world where, as McKinnon points out, many people spend

more time in virtual landscapes than natural ones – this ‘human re-wilding’ of sorts, and deliberate reconnection and cohabitation with wild species, may be more important that we realize.

McKinnon offers examples of human-nature reconnection and co-existence from different parts of the world. He devotes most of the entire last chapter of the book (excluding the epilogue), to an imaginary example illustrating how humans can live in a wilder world. McKinnon ends that chapter, and essentially the book, in echo of an earlier passage where he encourages us to “remember what nature can be; reconnect with it as something meaningful in our lives; and start to remake a wilder world” (page 157). He ends the book on a tremendously positive note, pointing out that “it just might be possible for seven billion people – maybe even more – to survive on this planet, and not only to stop the endless decline of the natural world but watch it return to astounding, perpetual life. All it will take is a wilder way of being human” (page 215).

It is difficult to do *The Once and Future World* justice in a book review. This rich, informative and optimistic book defies categorization and description. Let me just say that I recommend it highly for being well-researched, well-written, thought-provoking, imaginative, and compelling. May it compel readers toward a wilder future where, as McKinnon puts it, humanity can express its genius, and so can nature.

RENATE SANDER-REGIER

3, 11th Line, Bristol, QC, Canada