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Electronic Green Journal

Title

Encounters with Nature; Essays by Paul Shepard

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3609t8rf>

Journal

Electronic Green Journal, 1(13)

Author

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Publication Date

2000

DOI

10.5070/G311310404

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Review: Encounters with Nature; Essays by Paul Shepard
by Paul Shepard

Reviewed by [Cate Gable](#)
Berkeley, California, USA and Paris, France

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Shepard, Paul. *Encounters with Nature, Essays by Paul Shepard*. Florence R. Shepard (Ed.). Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999. 223 pp. ISBN 1-55963-529-0 (cloth). US\$24.95

Paul Shepard (1925-1996) is one of the pioneers of modern ecology. Avery Professor Emeritus of Human Ecology and Natural Philosophy at Pitzer College, he brought diverse disciplines to bear on how humans interact with and perceive the natural world.

This book, edited by his wife Florence, compiles published and unpublished essays written during the course of Shepard's life. As David Petersen says in the Introduction, Shepard's "'subversive science' of human ecology ... [brings together] the revolutionary study of the overarching significance of humanity's coevolution with wild animals in shared wild environs."

The themes present here are the legacy of our hunter-gatherer forebears; animals and their pervasive influence on our human being-ness, cognition, and imagination; ontogeny and the shift from bonding-to-mother to bonding-to-Mother-Nature as critical in the maturation of an individual; and "place" as a grounding of our being.

The lead essay, "The Origin of Metaphor: The Animal Connection," outlines one of Shepard's central themes. In this treatise on the stirrings of consciousness inside the human animal, Shepard proposes that the bear became an archetype for our developing sense of "self" and "other." He posits that our observing and testing wits with this magnificent creature sparked the beginnings of our first and greatest technology— language, and, specifically, our ability to use metaphor and symbology.

The female bear, after disappearing mysteriously with the sun all during the dark winter months, reappears with cubs in the spring. To early humans, the she-bear may have represented the mysteries of life and renewal. Shepard notes that we named the most prominent constellations in the sky Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, Big Bear and Little Bear. Our language captures "bear" in many forms: to bear fruit, to bear a child, to bear witness to, etc. Much of the imagery in Native arts and culture—mask making, dance and song—features the bear.

Ironically, now that humans—with the help of animals who provide us both food and food for thought—have become more conscious, we seem to have forgotten our origins and our helpers. We devastate the natural world and reduce to smaller and smaller patches those wild places where our companions in evolution can survive.

This essay ends with an uncharacteristically dramatic appeal. As Shepard says, "At the risk of being a little melodramatic, I close with a letter delivered to me by a bear." The bear, writing to "primate P. Shepard and Interested Parties" responds:

Having made them human, we continue to do so and now serve more and more in therapeutic ways, holding their hands, so to speak, as they kill our wildness. ... Once we were the bridges, exemplars of change, mediators with the future and the unseen. ... Now their numbers leave little room for us. They are wrong about our departure, thinking it to be a part of their progress instead of their emptying. When we are gone they will not know who they are. Supposing themselves to be the purpose of it all, purpose will elude them. Their world will fade into an endless dusk with no whippoorwill to call the owl in the evening and no thrush to make a dawn.

Let's hope, with Shepard's guidance from the pages of this text, we can forge a different path.

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