**Showcasing the DNR: The art and magic of being there**

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When asked, hunters – like anglers, hikers, campers and others who enjoy the outdoors – often say the richness of their experiences in the woods is created merely by “just being out there.”

This notion, while seemingly simple, is in fact quite profound.

It may be the best attempt to put into words the peacefulness of the forest when it snows or the sweet smells of the leaves and the trees, the talking songs of the birds and the river, the warm feeling of sunshine, cold winds drifting across your face or seeing your first black bear or moose up close.

Maybe what it’s like to just sit still and listen to the woods?

Ever really try to explain to someone what the clear, starry night sky looks like, or what it feels like to see it?

What about the experience of hiking a trail under hemlocks and pines, or looking down from a rocky ledge to see the shimmering lake below on a sunny afternoon?

Maybe the sights and sounds of watching a campfire into the morning hours or the startling experience of flushing a grouse?

Those who try to talk or write about these things they’ve experienced will often admit their descriptions fall short, no matter how accurate they may be.

I am among them.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, it should also be said there are countless things a camera cannot capture, no matter how great the lenses, the lighting or the photo post-production tools are.

To truly capture certain outdoor experiences or some of the most important intrinsic beauty of plants, animals, places and many kinds of natural phenomena, it certainly takes more than a thousand words, or one picture.

I think the elusive, missing ingredient in all the efforts to duplicate or convey these encounters is the human experience.

Whatever aspect of nature we are trying to photograph, write about or tell others about can often connect us so personally to nature, the world and the universe.

In many cases, these experiences are truly singular, personal and real – written indelibly on our souls. They will no doubt come to mind for years and years to come.

A storyteller, whether a writer, photographer or hunter, angler, skier, trapper or hiker, will never be able to truly convey the totality of those beautiful moments – no matter the medium.

I’ve found the best bet is to try to have as many of those incredible, personal outdoor experiences as I can, conceding I will never fully capture them in words or pictures.

I am reminded of very creative and capable people I’ve heard try hard to tell others about something that happened to them but eventually, they throw up their hands in futility saying, “I guess you had to be there.”

These days, even despite an uptick in participation attributed to the quarantined nature of the novel coronavirus pandemic, there are lots of people concerned about the increasing loss in the numbers of people having valuable outdoor experiences with nature.

There are consequences computers and digital technologies have created, especially when it comes to keeping many adults, and especially children, indoors or disengaged from personal and intimate experiences with the natural world.

On a recent trip to Crystal Falls in Iron County, I read a trailhead sign the Michigan Department of Natural Resources put up that I had never seen before. It’s located not more than a few steps outside the department’s field office there.

The author, whoever it was, understood this concern.

The sign titled “Planet Earth, Our Home” read:

*Our earth is a very forgiving planet – to a point. Many of us know more about ‘surfing the net’ than we do of the natural resources that sustain our lives, yet we go on pretending that technology will always quench our thirst, fill our bellies and run our cars, while retaining our quality of life.*

*As you walk this trail use all your senses to see, hear, smell, taste and feel life, and think about in which direction you would like to see mankind travel. What can you do to make this happen?*

I once had a paddler friend who likened himself to the character in Michael Martin Murphy’s song “Boy from the Country,” from his 1972 album, “Geronimo’s Cadillac.”

This friend of mine looked like a mountain man. His blond hair was worn shaggy and dirty, and his flannel shirts and blue jeans were slept in.

He talked about the animals of the forest speaking to him, his isolation from much of society and his love for paddling his canoe over the rivers and lakes of this rugged region.

Murphy – who also wrote and sang the 1975 hit “Wildfire” – wrote:

*Because he called the forest brother*

*Because he called the earth his mother*

*They drove him out into the rain*

*Some people even said the boy from the country was insane*

I think about my old friend every now and then, especially when I hear that song. I hope he’s still out there somewhere paddling his canoe silently past a beaver lodge, over a school of spawning trout and under the skies cast red by the setting sun.

I hope he’s found many more friends along his journey, people able to look beyond his gritty, disheveled exterior to glimpse the soul of nature and life in his heart.

When I picture him, I see him always paddling his canoe, heading somewhere around the river bend up ahead, looking for that next experience that will draw him even closer to nature.

In my own way, I’m traveling with him, looking for the purest experiences the natural world can offer, teaching me the truths concealed in the hearts of birds and animals, knowing all the while my greatest fulfillment will always come from “just being out there.”

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