

## Gary Snyder on endangered wilderness



GARY SNYDER and Jim Harrison, two of the world's finest poets,\* have published a book of conversations, *The Etiquette of Freedom*, recorded over a two-day period spent walking over the hills of southern coastal California. The book, which includes a DVD film of their talks, explores the importance of Snyder's education in anthropology at Reed College, his family life, his early approach to poetry, the early Beat movement, his Zen training, his view of nature and the environmental movement, which he was instrumental in shaping in the United States starting in the late 1960s.

In 1990, Snyder published *The Practice of the Wild*, a book which is, for many of his readers, the watershed of his ideas about nature and the nature of being human. The book is a treatise on man's place in nature, and an artistic, spiritual credo on how to live a responsible life that is grounded in reality. It traces out an ecological picture of how to make a place and region a home, how to be a positive force in working within and for nature, and what it means to engage in hot-topic environmental issues through the long view of anthropology. Finally, it is a partial autobiography of Snyder's wide-ranging life and interests. Along with his precise place-and-moment driven poetry, it has

BY ROY HAMRIC

# N Know Nature

Artwork by Tom Christensen

claimed its space on the shelf of 20<sup>th</sup> century masterpieces in the lineage of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir.

What many people in some circles of the ecological movement weren't prepared for was Snyder's tough minded, academically and spiritually derived long view of nature and the environment, and the role of humans in nature, first spelled out in the text portions at the end of *Turtle Island*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975. It is a perspective grounded in respect for scientific knowledge, ancient culture, history and the Buddhist understanding of cyclical arising and disappearance (impermanence) of all phenomena: land, flora and fauna, humans (and their ancestors) throughout time. At the core of his ideas is the hope that humankind, through will or through necessity, will find a way to lessen our destructive impact on the Earth's living creatures and the land. He consistently urges people to take delight in doing the real work to make things better in whatever place they call home — for their own sake.



**KJ: The concerns of anthropology account for much of your subject matter, especially in the ecology-environmental essays that started to emerge with *Turtle Island* in 1977. You came to the subject of nature and man with a very long view.**

GARY SNYDER: A good part of my perspective on world history was shaped by the perspective of cultural anthropology, and the working habits of the redoubtable Franz Boas. And I was studying ecology when it was only known as a useful branch of biology. Plus as a snow peak mountaineer with a climber's interest in geology I cobbled together a long-term perspective, I guess.

**In 1977, you wrote that we live in an anomalous time and the way things for now are isn't real, and it's a temporary situation. That leads many to assume you're pessimistic about civilization's ability to live in a more responsible way without dire environmental consequences. Yet, you con-**

**sistently sound notes of calm optimism.**

You don't give up on the ship til the water comes up to your chest. But the criticism of greed-based societies runs throughout my work. A sustainable society is possible and some flourished for millennia before the rise of "civilization."

**Can you remember when you first fully developed your vocabulary of nature, wild and wilderness?**

The terms were conceived holistically and are much deeper and more complex than many people understood at the time. That's a chore for a scholar who has the patience to actually read all my writings and figure out.

**Do these terms, as you see them, have parallels in Buddhist epistemology?**

I'm beginning to work on a "Buddhist memoir" which I hope will answer that sort of question in depth. The short answer is, yes

**Humans threaten the survival of many species and resources, just as other species threaten other species. Do you think we can halt or reverse this state of affairs, perhaps find a balancing point, or are the demographics insurmountable?**

As Tonto said to the Lone Ranger, "Speak for yourself, white man." It is not humans per se that threaten the planet, it is the institutions that are embedded in certain societies and which have now been taken up by the ruling elites of the "nations" but which the main numbers of people in the world are not part of — are indeed oppressed by. Note Stanley Diamond's book *In Search of the Primitive* where he describes recent civilizations as "oppression at home, exploitation abroad." This critique has been throughout my prose writings from the beginning.

**What do you have in mind when you say that ultimately nature is not endangered, wilderness is?**

That's an extension of the definitions I provide in *The Practice of the Wild* in the chapter "The

*Etiquette of Freedom.*” Nature is the phenomenal universe. Wilderness is that part of it which is free of much (there’s always some) human agency. Habitat is shrinking everywhere and species are going extinct.

**You called your book of selected and new poems *No Nature*. In the preface, you wrote: “We do not easily know nature or even know ourselves. The greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it.” Sometimes you take a hands-off approach, cautioning over-managing nature.**

Nature throughout the millions of years has been self-managing. That self-managing process even brought about the development of *homo sapiens* as part of the primate line.

**“The wild is indestructible,” you say. And, “Wildness is the state of complete awareness.” I see that as meaning that both nature and humans have an intrinsic state of being, which in people has been papered over by civilization and technological culture.**

Well, yes, but this is tricky. Civilization does not mean “civil society and high culture.” It means specialization and class divisions. Cultures and community and municipalities are not an enemy — K’ung said that in a society that has achieved some balance, the main function of government is rites and music (*Lun-yu*.) This could be Pueblo or many other pre-modern world societies. As the visionary Japanese poet Sakaki Nanao said, “We are the primitives of an unknown future.”

**The challenge is to integrate good environmental practice into the economy so it’s not seen as an effort with a negative return. We’ve made progress. On balance, are you pessimistic or optimistic?**

Recently in New York at a seminar someone said to me, “Are you a pessimist or an optimist?” All these simple-minded dichotomies. I answered, “The world is in such a terrible shape that you have to have a sense of humor. I’m not really an optimist, but I’m good-natured.”

**At first I was surprised to read this sentence: “Bio-regionalism is the entry of place into the dialectic of history.” By that you mean people around the world are for the first time stepping up to represent parts of nature, whether its rivers, rocks, trees, water, or different species.**

In earlier times people did live in places. So the above sentence is addressed to the present world and in particular the Marxist sense of history.

## No Matter, Never Mind

The Father is the Void  
The Wife Waves

Their child is Matter.

Matter makes it with his mother  
And their child is Life,  
a daughter.

The Daughter is the Great Mother  
Who, with her father/brother Matter  
as her lover,

Gives birth to the Mind.

—Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island*

**You’ve written that you seldom set out to write a poem, but they come to you. Are they still coming?**

You don’t know til they come. As professional gamblers say, “You never know if you’ll ever win again.”



*\*Gary Snyder has been an occasional contributor to KJ since we published “Of All the Wild Sakura,” extracts from his 1959 Kyoto diaries, in KJ #24; Jim Harrison was profiled by Roy Hamric in KJ #73.*