

FRESH TRACKS

THE TRAIL FORKS IN AMERICAN CONSERVATION



BY BRIAN KAHN

The call came from Swan Valley, a Melanie Parker on the line. I didn't know Melanie Parker, but I did know something about the Swan.

A few years back, when I was head of the Nature Conservancy in Montana, biologists had told us grizzly bear habitat there was threatened by clear cuts and potential land sales by Plum Creek Timber Company. They wanted us to broker a deal where the corridors the bears used would be preserved—an end to clear cuts, controls on roading, and swapping key Plum Creek sections for non-critical timber lands. We'd sent in staff and her report had not been good. A deal would be complex, with no assurance of success.

And local opinion, I asked, could we count on community support?

"No way," she said. "A lot of loggers and local business folks feel their livelihoods are being threatened, and they blame the bears." She added that our likely partners in the deal, Montana's Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and the Forest Service weren't all that popular, either.

That came as no surprise. The Montana Militia was very active in the Swan, sowing its government conspiracy, proto-fascist line. A few months earlier an anti-government fundamentalist had gunned down a deputy, leaving him for dead. Luckily, the deputy lived. But the would-be killer remained free. His house and small saw mill were far back in the woods, and the police feared a Ruby Ridge type stand-off, with a twist. They assumed the wanted man would radio for help from local Swan sympathizers—and get it. So local, state and federal law enforcement did nothing.

Around that time I'd been in the Swan and shared a meal with a former logger. When I commented on the intensity of the anti-government, anti-environmental feeling in the area, he nodded slowly. "When you feel people are trying to take away your way of life, it's fertile ground for hate."

So we in the Nature Conservancy did the same as the police. We did nothing on the Plum Creek deal, and kept our field staff farther north in more hospitable terrain.

"I'm Melanie Parker and I heard you might be interested in the work we're doing up here in the Swan." Her voice was young, warm energy over the phone. "My husband and I are doing winter mammal tracking surveys."

"What kind of tracks?"

"Furbearers, mainly predators. We've been doing the tracking project for almost two years. It's still way too early to talk about final results, but we're getting good data."

"What agency do you work with?" With cut-backs in wildlife agency budgets and staff, research is hard to come by. Maybe the feds, I thought, had kicked in some endangered species money.

"Actually," she said, "we work primarily with local folks, the old time loggers and hunters really know the country—the swamps, the small depressions, hidden meadows—they know where the animals trail. We work with the University out of Missoula, too, to make sure our methodology is sound."

For more than twenty years I'd been doing conservation work, and for the last five, I've focused on building collaboration between folks who earned a living from the land—ranchers and loggers—and environmental groups and public agencies. I'd seen progress in those last few years, seen people break through the defensive and crippling "us-them" blinders to find working common ground. But loggers and hunters gathering wildlife data? I'd never heard of such a thing.

"I'm interested."

Two weeks later, my wife, Sandra, and I turned off Highway 93 onto snow-covered gravel. Melanie met us at a fork in the road. She matched the voice, standing tall, with dark cross-country ski togs and a blue headband holding dark long hair. An easy, open, enthusiastic smile under light hazel eyes.

We unloaded daypacks and strapped on snowshoes. Then, with Melanie leading, we stepped into the wild woods.

I have been an outdoorsman for more than forty years, and have hunted, fished, hiked, and camped through a lot of wild country. I like to think I know a fair amount about the natural world, and that I can get by—find my way, apply First Aid, maintain body heat, if necessary, by building a fire under difficult conditions and finding, killing and eating wild food.

Most urban-based environmentalists lack such elemental knowledge of the natural world they so ardently want to preserve, but both they and I share the illusion that we know enough to hold the "right" views on how to protect nature. Technological society, however, insulates us from

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“ground-truth” testing of what we think we know, and shields us from immediate consequences of our illusions. A winter hike in wild woods serves as a sharp reminder of how partial is our knowledge; and how potentially dangerous are its limits.

“Here’s the trail,” Melanie said. I saw none. “It’s part of the old Salish trail which ran from the west, across the Swans, over the Missions, through what is now the Bob Marshall and out into buffalo country.” I knew that buffalo country—east of “The Bob,” the Rocky Mountain Front looming huge and sheer above the westernmost edge of the Great Plains. And just out in the flats, near the open mouths of the canyons, the now near-buried, circled stones which had not long ago ringed the bases of the buffalo hide tipis of the hunters. Two seventy-year lifetimes ago, the Salish were still there.

And here. For a second I could see it, a silent human line weaving among the trees, passing silently on moccasined feet. Short bows, quivered arrows, long buffalo lances, heading east in early summer.

Unlike contemporary humans, the Salish understood they depended for survival on the natural world. Their intimate knowledge of the habits and habitats of wild species, and of how to forage, hunt, kill and eat them, arose from necessity: Lack of knowledge meant death. Ironically, while we extol the closeness of Native Americans to the natural world, we choose to ignore its quintessential origins—patient, discerning, disciplined, utilitarian time in wild places. We want to believe that we can understand nature through television and the Internet, from the insulated comfort of high-tech homes. Worse, urban amenities and prejudices acculturate us to disparage precisely those whose rural lives, dependent on obtaining food and fiber from nature, most closely resemble the traditional peoples we claim to admire.

The Salish trail became visible as we traveled, following the contours of the rolling terrain, heading higher. As we hiked, we crossed other trails, made by deer, moose, snowshoe hare.

Then I heard voices, and two men emerged from the dark trees. They moved on aluminum snowshoes, wore wool and insulated caps. The taller had a light red beard, blue eyes, high cheekbones and a good nose. “Tom Parker,” he said, extending a strong hand. “I’m Melanie’s husband.” The voice was mid-toned, with a non-Montana twang. His partner was Tiger Hulett—stocky and dome-headed with a dark beard and open smile. A third generation Swan Valley logger.

A half mile on, we cut a fresh pine marten track. Four, two-inch long prints, bunched close together, then a gap of perhaps two feet, another set. I had once seen a marten, recently live-trapped and still fully wild. It moved ceaselessly in its wire pen, supple, nerve-driven, totally alive, its broad face framing probing, dispassionate eyes. I was, as always when in the close presence of a wild animal, fully absorbed by the perfection of its evolved form, honed by eons of the unforgiving struggle for life.

Sandra and I backtracked a few yards; the prints were clear, all five toes showing in the compressed, soft snow. The distance between them averaged twenty-nine inches.

“Hey, look at this!” called Tiger.

He and Melanie kneeled at the base of a thin lodgepole pine, and he pointed to a small, dark stain on the snow. Blood. “Breakfast,” he said. Whatever had been eaten had been small, small enough to be killed and eaten with minimal struggle, no loss of fur.

“And look at this,” Tiger said, beaming. He moved back five yards. “Tracks here measure five feet, seven inches between prints! That marten saw his meal and was really motoring.” I watched his open, logger’s face, felt his warmth for the small carnivore, his fellow creature of the deep woods.

It was a steep, long pitch to where three snow-

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mobiles waited, and when we arrived, Tom and Tiger tied the snowshoes and daypacks to the machines. Watching, Sandra asked whether skis or snowshoes were better in deep powder. She, and I, expected an answer as simple as the question.

Tom looked up from his work, reflective. “Well, what are you using them for—work, recreation, travel? What is the terrain—wooded, open, steep or flat? How much weight are you carrying?”

Unlike ours, his references were multiple, tangible, and consequential elements of reality.

We roared off on the snow machines, heading for country frequented by lynx. We covered miles of logging road, but cut no lynx sign. Still, many snowshoe hare prints marked the fresh snow, and one set of the huge, near-round tracks of a mountain lion.

We parked on a high ridge overlooking dark, pitching mountain slopes, gentler foothills, the winding river valley far below.

“I wanted to bring you up here,” said Tom, “so you could get a better sense of the country.” He pointed to a small, far-off hill. “You started out there this morning, and we met you just over that

drainage, this side of Lindbergh Lake.” We could see it—the distance we’d walked seemed absurdly small.

He pointed again, this time to a long, gently crowned ridge running gently down, east to west. “That’s Jocko Ridge. It is the critical corridor around here. All the animals use it—grizzlies, cougar, lynx, fisher, wolverine. And they all cross right down there, where the ridge drops into that crisscross of drainages. I travel that ridge all the time. It’s right there in the tracks.”

I looked carefully. It made perfect sense. The top of the long ridge had a gentle, energy-saving slope; tree cover was enough for shelter, yet open enough for easy travel; no other east-west terrain in sight was similar—everything else was steep and rough.

Over the years, as a county supervisor, Fish and Game commissioner, and Nature Conservancy director, in dozens of conversations, public hearings and magazine articles I’d seen or heard the mantra—“vital habitat, linkage zones and corridors.” Valid concepts, but all too often spoken by people who have never set feet on wild ground, yet are fully comfortable in the bloodless, certain theology of words. But standing on the high ridge with Tom Parker, the terms “corridor” and “linkage” came alive.

For Parker, as for the Shoshone, concepts emerge from and are grounded in experienced reality, sensitively, intensely touched and absorbed over slow time. The kind of time and experience that gives birth to listening, patience, and that peculiar combination of confidence and humility found among the best hunters and trappers, whether Shoshone, Anglo or African.

We headed down the mountain, stopping where the road cut through a recent logging operation. Earlier, I’d asked about logging practices in the Swan, and whether Plum Creek’s “new forestry” was public relations or real change. Tiger came up to our machine. “You asked about Plum Creek,” he gestured, indicating the cut around us. “Here it is.”

We stood in roughly the center of the cut, perhaps twenty acres.

Unlike old clear cuts the edges were not straight lines—they curved. All trees had been removed from the cut except for two stands of dense, spindly lodgepoles. Each stand was perhaps thirty yards in diameter.

Clearcuts have earned well-deserved contempt, but as with so much of human politics, reality is not as simple as emotionally comforting conclusions. Lodgepole is a fire-dependent and short-lived tree. Natural fire creates patchwork “clearcuts,” and in specific, appropriate settings, good forestry can replicate that, combining cutting and burning of woody debris. So I wanted to know if this had been purely a lodgepole cut.

“It was mixed forest,” said Tiger. “Lodgepole and Doug fir.” He gestured with mild contempt to the spindly stands. “They left these so they can say they’re not clearcutting any more. But those trees are so small they’ll be blown down in the first big wind. You can see some are already going.” True enough, roughly a fifth were leaning hard.

I asked how the local loggers felt. “They don’t like it,” he said. “But they’re hired labor on jobs like this. They do what they’re told.”

We stood in the snow, discussing the Swan’s

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history of logging. "We've been around here for a while," Tiger said. "We made mistakes, learned from them. We wanted to do things right because we wanted to live in this valley for generations, and we knew we needed a sustainable supply of trees to do that."

Tom spoke. "That all changed in the eighties. Reagan was in and the word came down in the Forest Service to get the cut out. And they sure did. They cut roads all over this country, brought in outside logging crews and really cut the trees."

He gestured back toward the high country, across miles of foothills bearing the scars of heavy clearcuts. "Those roads changed everything up here. They really opened up the country."

"How did that affect you?"

"Well, over ten years or so, I'd built up a pretty good guide business. Mainly mountain lions. Like every lion guide, I was assigned an area—the only outfitter that could hunt it. I had a real good clientele, all word of mouth. I'd only take three or four lions a year out of my area, and there were a heck of a lot of lions."

"Is this good lion country?"

"Just about the best in the state, in terms of lion density. It's pretty easy to go out with a hound and tree a lion just about anywhere around here. But we didn't take just any male lion. My clients were after very big lions, and that's not easy. So we'd have to hunt hard."

"So what did the roads do?"

"They ruined my business. You see, we hunted lions on foot, taking one hound, maybe two. Hike until we cut a track. Then we'd follow that

track until we jumped the lion, then turn the dog loose." He swung his arm across the huge, wild landscape. "Lions move around quite a bit. We'd cover a lot of country."

It had been a long time since I'd heard of anyone hunting cougar afoot.

"With the new roads, anyone with a pickup and a bunch of dogs could hunt lions. Drive around until they cut a track, dump out half a dozen radio-collared dogs. Then just ride in the truck and following the signal. When the lion trees, they walk a little way from the truck, shoot him, and look for the next one." He shook his head in disgust.

"So they basically blew out your area?"

"Yeah. They're still lots of lions—the take is controlled by quota—but you can't offer anyone a serious backcountry hunt. It's all pickup trucks. And that's not the way I hunt."

He paused, looked toward high peaks. "In terms of my hunting business, I could see the handwriting on the wall, so I started thinking about other ways to make a living. I'd been here more than twenty years and had gotten to know the country. I didn't want to have to start again someplace else. About that time I met Melanie."

She smiled. "Yeah, we met at a community meeting. People getting together to discuss what to do about all the changes. I was new here, right out of college."

"And what did you decide to do?"

"Well I had majored in environmental studies. And Tom knew the country like nobody else. So we came up with idea of combining forces, starting a business of backcountry classes, wildlife studies, winter camping."

I laughed. "And it worked so well you got married!"

"We started the tracking surveys on our own. We just thought it would be interesting to develop good data about what was out there, and it was a good way to introduce our students to hands-on studies. People loved it." Tom watched Melanie,

and you could feel the respect. "It's worked out pretty well."

"And how are the tracking surveys going?"

"Great. At first there was some skepticism from the agencies. I think they sort of felt, 'Who are those guys?' But the data's good, and there's no way they have the staff to do it themselves."

"And the locals? How do they feel? You're tracking lynx, and they may be listed as an endangered species. Aren't the loggers afraid you'll document something which will be used by environmentalists to shut things down?"

Tiger shook his head, and Melanie said. "No, we haven't run into much of that. You see, we hire local people to work with us. People like Tiger. The old timers, the loggers and trappers, really know the country. They aren't afraid of the information. Since they're gathering it, they know it's sound."

I thought back over dozens of conversations with biologists and administrators, who rarely have detailed data other than for deer and elk, hunted species which drive agency revenues. Here and there, scientists are still engaged in research on non-game species. But field research takes time, and with budget cuts, low staffing levels, and constantly increasing paperwork—processing subdivisions, water diversions, highway construction, plus environmental impact statements—agency folks are now basically desk jockeys. As a result, data on most species is poor to non-existent.

How can agencies make sound decisions on resource issues—from timber harvests, to hunting seasons, to subdivision impacts—if they do not have good data? The fact is, they cannot, and the issue is emblematic of a central challenge to the uniquely democratic heritage of American conservation.

Two hundred years ago, the elitist assumptions of aristocracy confronted a radical challenge in the American democratic experiment: All men are created equal and legitimate governmental power derived solely from consent of the governed. In the sphere of conservation, two foundational realities emerged as the young nation expanded westward. The first was the creation of a vast domain of land under public ownership—virtually all the land west of the Mississippi. And, second, through an 1852 Supreme Court decision, the American people, as the new "sovereign," were deemed owners of what had for centuries been private—the King's game.

The initial results of public ownership of land and wildlife in the poorly educated, rapidly expanding republic were disastrous. Land, water and wildlife were "mined" by every means available; the combined power of biological ignorance, commodity markets and railroads plundered grasslands, forests and species ranging from bison to pronghorn to the passenger pigeon.

But as in so many other aspects of the American experience, abuse generated awareness, struggle, and progressive change. By the early twentieth century the nation had embarked on a unique conservation experiment, founded on the management of the public estate—land and wildlife—by professional staff in tax-supported agencies. The results achieved have been extraordinary by almost any measure: Our nation has set aside tens of millions of acres for natural values and sustainable human use—a system of national and state parks, wildlife refuges, wilderness, public forests, grasslands, wetlands. And many species of wildlife have rebounded from near extinction to historic highs through a combination of research, habitat conservation, the banning of hunting for the commercial market—actions based on an evolved cultural acceptance that conservation of wild creatures and resources was important public

business. In short, a new sense of public ownership, responsibility and concern developed over time. It reached a high water mark in the 1970s, when mobilization of an urbanized, television-educated populace resulted in federal legislation to protect air and water quality and endangered species.

Still, tremendous success has been balanced by chronic failures, and increasing political tension: The decimation of wetlands and many forests—private and public—continue into the new century, as have the precipitous decline of many species. And conflict has sharpened between the public and private estates. Legislation to protect endangered species, wetlands, water and air quality, has increasingly restricted how private property is used, and created new battle lines.

At the threshold of the twenty-first century, our state-based conservation structure has reached essential limits. Faith in public institutions has declined and an era of anti-government backlash and shrinking budgets sharply erodes the capacity of agency-driven conservation. Further, as the post-World War II economic boom shifted over the last twenty-five years to stagnation and decline for much of rural America, the volatile charge that federal bureaucrats and environmental regulation were destroying rural economies and communities has gained credence. “Wise Use” politics, fanned by resource profiteers from state capitals to Congress, is one outgrowth. So is the emergence in rural America of the virulent, right-wing militia movement.

This political polarization, in turn, has destroyed the implicit social compact that has enabled American conservation. From the cities and suburbs came organized environmental support for legislation and funds; the active support of rural communities was not essential, but tolerance was. And tolerance was based on resource use.

Conservation is a human, political process, and in human politics, an ounce of concentrated opposition more than equals a pound of diffuse support. Experience around the world demonstrates that effective conservation depends on the support of those whose lives are most directly affected—local, rural people.

Because of our nation's wealth, we in America have not yet faced this truth. We have often sought to “save” nature by setting it aside from human, economic use: National Park, Wilderness, Wildlife Refuge, Area of Critical Environmental Concern. And we have delegated our responsibility to professional managers in “resource agencies.” An ironic consequence of this approach has been a weakening of the sense among people, especially rural people, that these resources are truly ours—and our children's. And as environmental regulations squeeze traditional rural means of earning a living—mining, logging, grazing livestock—alienation and hostility among resource-dependent communities has spread.

Neither urban-dependent environmental groups nor public wildlife agencies have an effective response to these volatile realities. As institutions, both are outgrowths of the prolonged effort to use science, law and regulation to curb resource abuse. Yet the very qualities needed to succeed in that governmental battleground prevent them from meeting today's new threats—declining resource agency budgets, chronic economic pressure, rural backlash.

Take the resource agencies: Every agency person I know understands that almost any step beyond a get-along, go-along agency line leads to immediate punitive action from the bureaucratic or political hierarchy. In this environment, principled staff are ostracized and demoralized; their weaker counterparts simply pit competing community advocates against each other, then proceed down the safe, impotent middle.

As for the conservationists, their organizations evolved at a time when the passage of tough fed-

eral legislation was key to curbing environmental abuse. Congress was and remains controlled by urban votes, and that's where the enviros organized. Their message combined (and still does) solid science with a potent dose of Walt Disney, Edenic nature. The emotional power of the message translates into effective fundraising—and simultaneously offends rural citizens, reinforcing their stereotype of enviros as urban, elitist and misinformed.

There is a definite class element to the urban/rural chasm. Environmentalists typically have enough financial and physical distance from interaction with the natural world to shield themselves from the economic consequences of environmental regulations, and from the quintessential biological truths that we all survive by killing and consuming other life forms, and we all consume large quantities of natural resources. It is no coincidence that the Sierra Club membership, urban-based and with an average annual income of \$78,000, recently voted to ban all logging on national forests. Such folks conceive the protection of nature as preventing and eliminating human use—except for the recreational uses they and their peers enjoy. Their insular world prevents them from grasping that the central conservation battle of the future lies not over remnants of “pristine” landscape, but rather in the vast areas of the globe where *Homo sapiens*' impact exists. The challenge is nothing less than radical—the creation of new economic models which use land and water to meet both human and ecological imperatives.

Thus, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the two main “engines” of American conservation—government agencies and urban-based conservation organizations—are stymied by their structure and institutional biases.

A major fork in the American environmental road lies just ahead, with profound implications for conservation's future. We will either retreat toward privatization of public resources, or extend participatory, public responsibility in new directions.

The first path was James Watt's agenda—and resulted in the gutting of environmental regulations and the wholesale clearcutting of millions of acres—and it remains a goal of the American Right. Whether motivated by simple greed, or an ideological hostility to public control of land and resources, their objectives are simple and direct: Reduce budget and staff in the resource agencies, thereby generating worse stewardship of the public domain, and simultaneously unleash “private initiative and efficiency,” including conversion of the public estate into private.

Advocates of resource privatization reflect the interests of the most powerful of current human institutions—the global, market-based economy—and range from the who's who of economic and political players to opulently financed non-profit think-tank and “research” groups like Montana's Political Economy Research Center. Their mantra is simple: Private ownership encourages efficient, caring use. Public ownership creates bureaucratic, uncaring mismanagement. The remedy, they say, requires expansion of the scope of “private property rights,” by reducing both public ownership and public regulation of private use.

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To those who remember the prolonged national history of privately-owned resource devastation, the smooth rhetoric of the privatization agenda rings false. Corporate imperatives of quarterly profits, “accountability to shareholders” and a commodity-driven bottom line stand in essential conflict with the undulating timeframes and profound interdependence of the natural world.

The second fork in the road—the creation of a new compact between urban and rural America, enabling the direct participation of rural people in the management of the landscapes in which they live—is untraveled, and will require the creative expansion of the foundational concepts of American democracy, of Jeffersonian ideas of responsible ownership and human-scale institutions. This would require that urban people overcome their isolation from the wild world and realize that we all are, in poet Gary Snyder's potent phrase, part of the meal. This would necessitate the extension of trust beyond public servants to rural people, some without professional education, in making decisions affecting public lands. People like Tiger Hulett and Melanie and Tom Parker. It would require a broad social commitment to redirect financial resources to create ecologically compatible, community-based jobs, where the human and non-human elements of the natural world co-exist in working wildlands.

Before considering this second road, it needs to be acknowledged that there is much history documenting the “tragedy of the commons,” a good deal of it to be found in the experience of totalitarian socialism. But there is another side of the coin, including many examples of economically and ecologically viable, cooperative resource use both in the United States and internationally.

Scale will be key. Rare is the well-managed, extremely large tract in monolithic ownership, private or public. A broadened “democratic” road in American conservation will depend on a scale of management compatible with both the ground-truthed knowledge of local people and the science-based resources of public agencies, universities and conservation groups. To be successful, the outcome must produce the same sense of personal, responsible, caring stewardship toward public land and wild species that is exemplified by the best managers of private ground.

Can we really travel down this second road? Can we bring together the deep, but partial, knowledge of rural folks—loggers, ranchers, hunters, trappers, bird-watchers—with the scientific and financial resources of agencies and national groups? Can we accept the reality that all knowledge is partial, that responsibility means we all have dirt under our nails and blood on our teeth, that the real bottom line is we are totally dependent on the health of the biological world? Can we overcome key aspects of our past—institutions and attitudes which prevent us from coping with a changed and changing world?

More than five years of focused work with ranchers and loggers tells me that perhaps we can. These are people who feel to the bone that their work is honorable, and believe this work portrayed by media as rape and desecration of the wild. That perceived disrespect cuts deep. Many feel they are in a low-grade, lost war of attrition. And gradually among them, the lethal mindset of war has set in: “It is us or them.” Yet it is these very people I have seen change. It takes many sessions around kitchen tables, over coffee, Coke and home-baked cookies. It takes concrete issues

to wrestle with, practical problems to solve, tangible lessons of shared good will. It takes felt respect, honest listening and learning and gradual subsidence of defensiveness and fear. One sees it in body language—the arm-crossed, stiff-back posture shifting to lean-back, splayed leg relaxation. One sees it in the muscles around the eyes, hears it in words, as when the head of the recently-formed Madison Valley Ranchlands Group says to a neighbor, “I never thought there were people outside of here who care about this land, and were willing to help us take care of it. I was wrong

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about that.” A little later, he adds, “Looking at what we’ve done these past two years, I’ve changed my mind. I think we have a chance to preserve this valley.” When you hear that, you’ve just heard something different, and real.

How hard it is to say, “I was wrong.” To acknowledge that someone I defined as an opponent or enemy has valuable knowledge I do not. To accept the reality that we share key common values, and can work together to conserve the land. It is hard, but I have seen it done.

Will we make this happen across the West? I do not know. I do not know if the wealthiest, most knowledge-based and competent society in history is capable of recognizing these elementary truths. The very wealth, the very technology which generates our unprecedented knowledge and choices, detaches us from the actual, living world.

Tom Parker pulled the snowcat to a stop in the corner of a large clear cut. The ground sloped down to the north, bottoming out at the curving line of a small stream. The creek flowed north and east through what looked to be timbered bottomland.

“This was a special place,” Tom said. “In all my years in the woods, I’d never seen so much grizzly bear activity concentrated in one area.” He gestured toward the bottoms. “Each spring I’d come up that creek—there are rich meadows all through there—and the whole place would be

dug up by bears. Just like you’d brought a tractor in and plowed it up. I looked and looked, but I couldn’t figure out what those bears were digging up. Finally, I got it.” He paused, blue eyes shining. “Truffles! They were digging up truffles.”

He pointed to the sharp line of trees which marked the edge of the cut. “The bears used to bed in bear grass just beyond there. I spent about a week down there one spring and identified seven different adults. They’d be bedded in that tall grass and when a logging truck would come along this road, they’d lift their head up out of the grass and turn to listen until it passed.”

The distance from the beds to the road appeared to be no more than one hundred fifty yards. I’d heard a lot of bear stories, but never such a firsthand account of their intelligence and tolerance of disturbance.

Tom continued. “I heard the quarter section that had the truffles was for sale, so I called The Nature Conservancy to let them know about it.”

“When was that,” I asked, wondering if I’d been with TNC when he called.

“Bout four years ago. I told them all about it, that of all the places I’d seen this had the highest bear use. I asked if they could buy it.”

“The guy I talked to seemed interested, said he’d get back to me. About six months later, he called to say that they had other priorities.”

“Jesus. I was head of TNC. I don’t remember hearing anything about it. We were focused on the North Fork of the Flathead then, but, my God...” I shook my head.

“Yeah, I couldn’t figure it out. Anyway, they sold it, and the new owners did a thinning cut. And about that time, Plum Creek clear-cut this section. The bears moved out. I haven’t seen sign from a single bear since then.”

As we headed down the trail, I thought about that loss and what it signified. How had we treated his call? Had I been told, and dismissed the proposal based on Tom's lack of “credentials?” What did that failure say

about the Conservancy, about me, about how we judge the quality of information, and people? I had no answers.

When we arrived at the pickups, I heard the sound of a dog. Not a bark, but something deeper, musical and rich. Tiger walked to his truck, opened the door and a near-gaunt animal slipped out of the cab. She moved easily across the snow, her nose low. The head was slender, almost delicate, with long, loose ears. She was short haired and dark brown, with something like freckles on her face. A Black and Tan hound, relict breed of an earlier time, of Faulkner's damp nights and swamp bears, when a dog's character and talents meant either food or hunger for human families.

She came close, long tail swinging, dark liquid eyes with no bottom. Moving, she was lithe, sinewy, incredibly smooth. Her chest was deep, her belly tucked high behind, a creature that could cover ground.

“That’s Molly, my lion hound,” said Tiger. “She’s just a pup, but she’s already a pretty good hound.”

“She’s a fine dog,” said Tom. “Really good.”

The newcomers held no interest and the hound moved to the edge of the woods. Air moved in the trees. She raised her head, sculpted half by wilderness, half by humankind. The tail froze. Her long, exquisite nose lifted, probing, discovering the secrets of the wild world. ■