

# **Wilderness Survival Education in America: Histories, Reflections, and Practical Applications Within the Modern Environmental Movement**

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## Introduction

There is something alluring about the life of a stalker. Something about escaping the notice of other humans, using their own habits and blind spots against them. Becoming a shadow. That was the life I decided I wanted a decade ago, after reading *The Way of the Scout* by Tom Brown, Jr.

In the scout book Brown was an eco-warrior, meting out punishment to ne'er-do-wells who dared to pollute or otherwise defile the pristine Pine Barrens, Brown's New Jersey stalking grounds. The villains were so blatantly evil you could practically see "bad karma" written all over their faces. Brown and Rick, his best friend at the time, would creep unseen into frat parties in the woods and crash them, driving the college students out of the forest; they raided a chemical plant upstream from their camp; they sabotaged the war games of soldiers training near the Pine Barrens.

As a blossoming neo-Luddite, another element of Brown's stories appealed to me: the fact that he used primitive tools and wisdom to defeat his domesticated foes was enchanting. For once I was reading a story where traditional wisdom prevailed. Brown was a Native-American-trained-kung-fu-child-of-the-earth-meditation-master. His writing struck a chord. I wanted to obtain the "simplicity and truth of the spiritual realities before they were lost to time and obscurity" (Brown, "TWOTS," 3). Brown's stories chronicled a fight to preserve nature on a physical, personal level, outside of the jurisdictions of law and policy, without the tools of the destroyer (technology). It was positively empowering rhetoric.

Brown advertises his wilderness survival school in the back of each of his 18 books, and I had wanted to go for years. In May 2008, I had the opportunity to attend his

Standard class, the class that all students have to take before moving on to other levels within the school. The school promised to be a far different experience from Brown's education, which is the basis of most of his literature: Brown met a Lipan Apache (a name that describes some Native Americans who lived around Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and a portion of northern Mexico) when he was 7 years old. The Apache, named Stalking Wolf, taught Brown all that he knew about wilderness survival and awareness—lessons that ranged from basic survival skills like making fire to “scout psychological warfare” to relating spiritually to nature. Stalking Wolf eventually moved away and Brown retreated into the wilderness and traveled all over the country. He returned to New Jersey and formed the Tracker School in order to pass on Stalking Wolf’s legacy and promote his own environmental concerns.

The Tracker School fascinated me. On first glance it seemed like a very straightforward process—I go to Tracker School, I learn skills, I practice them and walk off into the forest like a ghost. Poof. But I had to face the fact that my dream was ultimately selfish and perhaps unrealistic. If I ignored civilization and turned my back on the environmental issues I find so threatening I would risk losing the wild nature, the sense of Otherness that I cared so much about. I would have to go to Tracker School, hear about the wonders of the wild, and go back to the city to integrate my knowledge into my civilian life.

I began to wonder, if the paradigm of environmental destruction were going to change, what would that change look like? Who would foster the change? Although I don’t think that any one survival school can ultimately mandate human relationships with nature, I began to wonder what Brown had to offer society in terms of a new

environmental consciousness.

Navigating the Tracker School website and then attending a class there offered me more questions than answers. Brown and his instructors preached daily about having reverence for the natural world, but I wondered if the message was getting through to all of the students, or if he really expected it to reach and change his large audience. How did he really hope to instill that in a practical, material fashion? For that matter, when he preaches reverence, what is his definition of the proper way to show that reverence? What are the inner workings of his teaching methods? How does the program fit into a larger social and historical context? How does the Tracker School appeal to potential customers and how does the school's approach compare to other survival schools? Going to the Tracker School took on far more weight than I had anticipated.

In this thesis I explore several questions that relate to human - nature relations through my experience as a Tracker school participant and an examination of the academic literature and wilderness school advertisements. The first question involves an exploration of American attitudes towards, and interactions with wilderness, leading up to the popularization of modern wilderness survival schools. After a brief review of historical precedents for contemporary interests in wilderness education, I analyze the creation of the image of survival schools and their marketing techniques through a content analysis of school promotional materials. This historical and textual analysis is then complimented by key informant interviews with students and staff, as well as participant observation at the Tom Brown, Jr. Tracker School in May 2008. The thesis concludes by discussing enduring tensions and transformations in the way survival skills are conceptualized, consumed, and communicated in America, and how these tensions

and transformations relate to evolving human – nature relations.

## **Methodology**

Finding a research method appropriate for my set of interdisciplinary questions was challenging. The basis of my understanding of this topic was concentrated around a fairly intense week at the Tom Brown, Jr. Tracker School, where the material was presented within the matrix of the character of the surrounding Pine Barrens; in a word, holistically. It seemed almost unethical to critically pick apart the gift that was the Tracker School—it was a restorative, ritual-filled, emotional experience for me.

During my intense experiences as a student and participant at the School, I continued to conduct interviews. That being said, I stuck with the original plan of interviewing participants about their experiences. I asked them questions about their own personal environmental ethics and their opinions on the philosophy of the Tracker School, meaning the open reverence of nature. I asked them as well of their motivations for attending and their feelings throughout this “rite of passage.” In staff interviews I concentrated on the instillation of environmental ethics and the reception of those ethics, as well as the structure of the classes. Their stories were often poetic and instructive.

Upon returning home I realized that I had more questions about this experience and the roots of wilderness survival schools. The historical review explores American relationships with nature from the European invasion and conquest of the New World to the formation of modern wilderness schools. While this is a brief review of an inexhaustible subject, it provides the background by which one might come to understand how traditional skills, once relevant tools for survival, have become a commodity in the United States.

With that historical review in place, I reviewed wilderness school promotional material. The photographs on survival school websites provide information on the skills that prospective clients can hope to learn and the setting and methods by which the learning process takes place. In addition, the images show what type of person might typically attend a survival class. I performed content analysis on the images, which will be explained in detail in another section.

The description of the school outlines the process by which daily life progressed during my week as a participant-observer at the Tracker School from May 25, 2008 to May 31, 2008. It also offers a brief history of the school as well as an analysis of Brown's and the instructors' teaching methods.

The discussion offers a deeper analysis of different themes running through the Tracker School. While Brown's situation is particular there are universal themes running throughout the Tracker School and the acquirement of survival skills. For instance, survival schools are commonly associated with emergency preparedness and apocalyptic thinking. They are often associated with spirituality and a rejection of technology. Nevertheless, they are the product of the modern fascination with the rarity and purity associated with "true" wilderness. They are a modern commodity juxtaposed with primitivism, almost hypocrisy. They are confusing and complicated.

### **American attitudes towards wilderness and the advancement of outdoor recreation**

Wilderness survival schools did not suddenly appear as an option for today's discerning adventure tourism client, wrapped up neatly alongside ice climbing and snorkeling. Like any other type of outdoor recreation, these schools emerged from years

of colonial encounters among peoples, and between various kinds of pioneers and the landscapes where they carried out settlement, clear-cutting, and finally modern ecology and wilderness preservation. Of course there have been intervening episodes of romanticism about the natural world, and those peoples whose livelihoods are most closely bound up with it. Today's American concepts of wilderness recreation are far removed from the practical lives of the colonists from the New World who set the American machine in motion. Historians have preserved records of colonial attitudes towards wilderness, many of which were hardly favorable (Nash, 28).

Although European emigrants came somewhat forested areas, nascent America was wild and presented a grave problem for her new inhabitants. What to eat? What are those serpents with "Rattles in their Tayles that will not flye from a Man..." ? (Nash, 29). Physical and spiritual threats awaited every pioneer. For not only did they have to carve out a place in the wilderness, they had to toil under the weight of European superstitions that were dragged from the Old World just as surely as the drive for agriculture and civilization.

For Puritans and other god-fearing settlers, wilderness was a wasteland, home to the devil and assorted horrors that would steal any child who wasn't nailed down. Roderick Nash writes extensively on Americans' views of nature in *Wilderness & the American Mind*:

If paradise was man's greatest good, wilderness, as its antipode, was his greatest evil. In one condition, the environment, garden-like, ministered to his every desire. In the other it was at best indifferent, frequently dangerous, and always beyond control. And in fact it was with this latter

condition that primitive man had to contend. (Nash, 9)

Colonists dealt with a shattered reality that paradise was not to be found in the New World, but in turning the New World into the Old. They quickly worked to relieve themselves, and the original inhabitants, of their “savage” conditions.

The hatred of an untamed wilderness is hardly surprising. These were not outdoorsmen and women approaching a beloved retreat—these were emigrants, used to centralized states, particular cultivated European landscapes, and infrastructures. They didn’t recognize many of the plants and animals. They had to build shelter from scratch. Coming to a New World willingly or not, to build new lives for themselves, why wouldn’t these invaders seek to create new homes as replications of the lands they left? Why wouldn’t they hate the unknown wilderness and people who thwarted their attempts to comfort themselves with the familiar?

Antipathy towards wilderness was programmed into the early American mind by the means of commerce as well. Pioneers were to subdue the land, turn marshes into productive fields and wrestle old growth forests to their knees. The reputation of the burgeoning American culture depended on its ability to manipulate raw materials and areas into familiar shapes. After American independence, with the whole world watching the new civilization advance, development took place quickly and with little thought to adapting to the new environment or exploring its mysteries (Nash, 42). Pioneers advancing towards the west would have found modern concepts of wilderness conservation or recreation laughable. The primary motivation was to carve out livable space according to preconceived notions of human comfort. Appreciation for natives, who stood in the way of progress, or indigenous forms of knowledge, were of no use to a

growing superpower with a global inferiority complex.

### *Beginnings of modern wilderness recreation*

Wilderness recreation had its beginnings during the Romantic period of American history. With human habitation reliably carved into the wilds, Americans were allowed a contradictory mix of curiosity and revulsion. The hard work of pioneers paid off and some members of subsequent generations could look up from the plow into the Appalachians with an admiring eye. Nash writes that untrammeled wilderness was America's answer to European culture and finery, something to set the North American continent apart from all others (67). Slowly the reviled and disappearing wilderness, for its rareness, became valuable. The literature of Thomas Burnet, Edmund Burke, and Washington Irving reflects this gradual shift of the American consciousness. Eighteenth-century primitivism and Rousseau's noble savage fit increasingly well into the new nation's retrospection. (It was only later that the idea of escaping to "untouched" wilderness, in increasingly short supply, occurred to anyone. The return to the excitement of wilderness exploration occurred to a generation with more time on its hands). Danger was expected in wilderness exploration, but with that could come the sense of adventure or excitement and Americans began to accept the idea of wilderness that coincided along with civilization (*Ibid*).

This short treatment of the rich and often disturbing European settlement of North America is not meant to be glib. It has been stated in multiple arenas that the settlers were invasive, destructive, and murderous. They quite obviously tromped all over the physical and cultural realities of the indigenous people and radically changed the landscape in

ways that cause them to resemble an invasive species. But the turnabout that has occurred over the last century or so, the interest in lost wilderness and survival skills, is all the more remarkable due to this history. How interesting to come so far out of the woods just to turn back, as if pining for some lost interaction with the collective unconscious.

### *Cultural and philosophical aspects of embracing wilderness*

Distance from a pioneering life affords people the luxury of nostalgia. Exploration of American wilderness (and in some ways triumphing over its wildness) became a pleasure, a form of leisure. Well-known writers came to the defense of wilderness that was being swallowed by civilization. Enter Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Robert Marshall, among other American authors. Born in 1817, Thoreau is famous for a multitude of works, including *Civil Disobedience* and *Walden*. He spoke the iconic words, “in Wildness is the preservation of the world,” aloud to the Concord Lyceum in 1851 and, in an America used to thinking of nature in Romantic or abstract terms, “cut the channels in which a large portion of thought about wilderness subsequently flowed” (Nash, 84). He took the colonial idea of wilderness as a foreboding place and turned it on its head. For Thoreau, wilderness embodied the great potential of man, a place where people could escape busy commerce and contact a higher realm of consciousness. This is in great contrast to the colonial and pioneering experience: “constant exposure to wilderness gave rise to fear and hatred on the part of those who had to fight it for survival and success” (Nash, 43).

*Walden, or Life in the Woods* is a telling saga of humankind’s perceptual shift. Both a story of naturalism and a criticism of the then-current social system, *Walden* has

provided inspiration for over a century. Thoreau settled into his house on Walden pond, about a mile and a half from Concord, Massachusetts (Thoreau, 71) “because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (Ibid, 75). Thoreau’s work resonates with the idea that human civilization as he knew it was not adequate to the challenge of maintaining his passions and interests, and that amassing material goods was not the point of life. He is not in any sense the “survivalist” that we think of from television shows or depictions of aboriginal living. He was close to civilization, and it was likely that proximity that drew him into the woods—if everything were a wilderness, why would he have need to escape development? But that dichotomy presented options to him, and his literary mind took him to undreamt of places.

With the struggle of his forefathers behind him, how could Thoreau dare to say that their earthly paradise was backwards, was simply not good enough? He represents a generation looking back on itself with appreciation and some disdain. There is the sense that it is good that “The thick wood is not just at our door, nor the pond, but somewhat is always clearing, familiar and worn by us, appropriated and fenced in some way, and reclaimed from Nature” (Ibid, 108). Yet in contrast there is that part of Thoreau reaching out to the wilderness in a new way:

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink

crawls with its belly close to the ground. At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature (Ibid, 261).

His contemporaries did not always accept his views, but his writing marks a shift from contempt of to admiration for the wild (Thoreau, 518).

John Muir was and unequivocal voice of the wilderness. In 1849 an 11-year old Muir moved to America from Scotland with his father and was immediately enchanted by the “boundless woods full of mysterious good things; trees full of sugar, growing in ground full of gold; hawks, eagles, pigeons filling the sky; millions of birds’ nests, and no gamekeepers to stop us in the wild, happy land” (Muir, 30). His interest in botany and a life change after an industrial accident led him to take a 3-year sabbatical that is chronicled in his journals, published after his death as *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*. In the 1870’s he began guiding people through the Yosemite area and publishing the essays on natural history that made him an iconic wilderness preservationist (Ibid, 841).

Muir’s writing demonstrates none of Thoreau’s hesitancy in acclaiming nature. Wilderness was a temple of worship. Mentioning a white orchid he found in the woods, Muir wrote, “I never before saw a plant so full of life; so perfectly spiritual...it seemed pure enough for the throne of the Creator. I felt as if I were in the presence of superior beings who loved me and beckoned me to come. I sat down beside them and wept for joy” (Ibid, 839). He translated this love to the public in order to preserve beloved spaces—his essays swayed public opinion for creating Yosemite National Park, with the

borders of the park prescribed by Muir to Congress (Oravec, 246). He managed to affect so much change despite living during a period of rapid industrial development in the United States. Besides his accomplishments, his writings show a perceptual shift in human consciousness of the American wilderness. Muir spurred a people alienated from nature into the woods, either through his example or vivid descriptions. That example and the movement it carried along with it formed the roots of wilderness recreation as we know it today and the creation of the Sierra Club, one of the largest environmental NGOs in the United States and the world.

### *Nature as commodity*

Photography in the late 1800's reflects another form of America's attitudes of wilderness, and perhaps explains a little about the eventual commodification of many forms of wilderness experience. In 1867 began one of the first geological explorations of the American west, ordered by the U.S. Department of War, in order to map the area between the Rockies and the Sierra Nevadas.

It was a conquest of documentation, a mission to record all rock formations, mountain ranges, detrital plains, mines, coal deposits, soils, mineral, ores, and saline and alkaline deposits; a campaign to map the chief mining districts and the topography of the entire region; and a mission to assemble collections of botanical, geological, and ethnological specimens (Wickliff, 41).

Photographers were called in to document environmental features for the burgeoning tourist industry and also to show the industry of man in developing mining operations and

agricultural enterprises in a rugged land. The survey projects symbolized both an aesthetic appreciation for nature and man's subjugation of nature for industrial purposes (Ibid, 42). Ironically the surveys often took place with Native American guides, whose traditional knowledge base and motivations for exploring nature, we might assume, were drastically different from the focus of the surveyors. It is obvious that much logging, mining, and forcible removal of western Natives followed the surveys.

A certain mindset prevailed during the late 1800's that made it possible for humans to justify subjugating the American wilderness to exploitation as a bundle of resources. This was the idea of man's place in the natural world and a way to escape a pure animalistic fate. In 1864 Author George Perkins Marsh published *Man and Nature* in which he "...asked whether man was 'of nature or above her' and concluded that humans were above nature, exerting an influence on nature that was different in character than the other animals. His purpose was to show that humans were free moral agents working independently of nature, not mere automatons" (Kingsland, 9).

There were still within this wholesale distribution and destruction of natural resources people who saw that turning wilderness into a money -making operation was unsustainable. President of the California State Agricultural Society C. F. Reed commented in a meeting in 1869 that the enormous trees considered "the grandest and most majestic in the world" (Wickliff, 51) were in fact not an inexhaustible supply. He also predicted the problems that his state and the entire country would have when population couldn't keep up with resource supply over a century in advance. He is listed a "minority voice" during West's timber boom (Ibid). The relevant questions of the time period weren't about conservation or seeking information for the sake of knowledge, but

instead, where focused on mapping out resources and learning how to extract, process, and sell them as quickly as possible.

As the American landscape was denuded by industry, new authors continued to appear who promoted ideas about wilderness and conservation. Aldo Leopold was one of those authors. Leopold grew up in Iowa and was encouraged by his parents to study the natural world, particularly birds (Nash, 182). He graduated from Yale in 1908 and decided to pursue a career in forestry. After receiving a graduate degree in forestry from Yale in 1909, he moved to the southwest region for a forest assistant position in New Mexico and Arizona. Leopold was quick to promote the “nonmaterial values of National Forests” (Ibid, 184) and the National Forest Service at that time began to publicize natural areas for recreation and tourism. Leopold responded to the conservation issues associated with recreation in wilderness areas and the NFS tourism promotion by asking for sizable chunks of southwestern land to be undeveloped with roads. His work resulted in the protection of over 500,000 acres of the Gila National Forest for wilderness recreation (Ibid, 187).

In 1924, while Leopold was mulling over the idea of wilderness preservation for the very sake of wildness, President Calvin Coolidge called for a National Conference on Outdoor Education. By this point in history many Americans were responding to the outdoors with warmth, if not full-blown support of wildness. Leopold took the opportunity at the next session in 1926 to promote the foundation of outdoor recreation as he saw it: untrammeled wilderness. The Forest Service responded to his call as more and more administrators began to wonder just how much Americans should “civilize” wilderness (Ibid, 191). Leopold’s strident call and tireless work on the behalf of

wilderness signified and advanced a change in social consciousness as more people began to explore feelings of wilderness and push back at the colonial paradigm that conquered it.

*A Sand County Almanac* is Leopold's most famous work and poetically defines his reverence and careful attention to the natural world around him. Although he was not at all in opposition to his contemporary Muir, his writing is gentle, focusing less on his exploits in the wild than the fact that, "For us of the minority, the opportunity to see geese is more important than television, and the chance to find a pasque-flower is a right as inalienable as free speech" (Leopold, xvii). The book follows the path of Leopold's days as he and his family rebuild the landscape around an old farm in Wisconsin.

The book, published posthumously, is an ecological text written from the viewpoint of a man in love with nature, equal parts poetry and science, perhaps one of the most effective and science-driven treatises of the preservationist movement. A descriptive account of the social life of the male woodcock is followed by this conservative viewpoint, which represents the tenor of the book:

The woodcock is the living refutation of the theory that the utility of a game bird is to serve as a target, or to pose gracefully on a slice of toast.  
No one would rather hunt a woodcock in October than I, but since learning of the sky dance I find myself calling one or two birds enough. I must be sure that, come April, there be no dearth of dancers in the sunset sky.

(Leopold, 31)

Man must seek out the intricate and fascinating truth about the workings of nature, Leopold seems to say, while at the same time recognizing his dependence upon the font

of life. Dissection of nature won't do, but a marriage of curiosity and due respect just might.

It was also during this time that twentieth century Americans caught up to other cultures with the idea that humankind and wilderness had a connection with the earth—that, in more scientific terms, there was “a growing awareness of the interrelations of organisms and their environment...that protecting wild country was a matter of scientific necessity as well as sentiment” (Nash, 182). Leopold was part of a movement that not only gathered from fieldwork the proof needed to illustrate that interconnectedness, but also began to dig at the base of a staunch hierarchy that placed humans squarely at the top.

### *The birth of ecology*

Ecological studies had taken place as Americans began to emphasize science and fieldwork as ways to manage finite resources in the late 1800's (Kingsland, 5). Ecology as a discipline separate from applied resource management emerged in the early 1900's. The very fact that humans had begun to significantly alter landscapes helped to pave the way for the science of ecology, a field of dynamic and interactive studies. In contrast to earlier ideas of man as separate from nature, this new field forced a collusion between man as an animal that changed landscape wherever it put its foot down, although the problems for ecology still centered around human problems, namely can we predict environment response to human pressures and how do those responses affect civilization and human health (a broad definition of health—physical, economic, political) (Ibid, 5).

“Ecology” was a blanket term with a variety of uses that in the 1930's suggested

predictability and power over natural processes. For instance, the idea of a climax forest has its roots in ecology—“Left undisturbed, every bare area would begin a slow but inevitable movement to its climax, and the final form was as constant and predictable as that of the individual developing embryo” (*Ibid*, 151). This idea of ecological determinism was the brainchild of Frederic Clements, a botanist who worked on plant succession. His ideal of ecology turned it into a technology, a remote control where one could press pause and suspend the development of an ecosystem indefinitely on its journey to its “logical conclusion.” Beginning, middle, and end. Humans could use ecology to read a forest like an open book, regardless of the fact that it suggested more about our tendency to think linearly than what was really occurring in nature. Ecology was the science of control over time and landscape. As such it made it possible the next step of the equation—that civilization and technological development was the climax of mankind’s work.

However, Clements’ ideals were challenged by mid-century. Botanist Henry Gleason suggested that “...the distribution of species, far from being an organism [ecosystem], was merely a coincidence” (*Ibid*, 158). This countered Clements’ argument that nature was predictable and, in its “natural” state, unidirectional. Historian James Malin refuted Clements’ claims that policy-makers ought to govern human-created ecosystems (think agriculture) in order that the parts of the whole act together in an ecologically-conscious manner. Malin suggested that biologically based policy equaled totalitarianism and that ecological determinism was at best naïve. He attacked the ideas that human beings caused ecological disturbance wherever they went and downplayed environmental concerns that humans needed to act quickly to return nature to a pre-

human state before all was lost. Instead of looking towards a perfect equilibrium that humankind had destroyed, Malin looked for a way of studying ecology that allowed humans to continue development without completely eradicating their own resource base while working with modern technology—atomic weapons have their place here (*Ibid*, 164).

Human geographer Carl Sauer also challenged environmental determinism by emphasizing the impact that indigenous Americans must have had during their widespread occupation of the continent. He also refuted the idea that a particular climax community existed—it must be that the landscape in coordination with plants and animals that determined the composition of an ecosystem. As such humans were not always a destructive force in nature. Sauer also bemoaned the rapid industrialization of this continent and others with the banner of progress. It is easy to see from this brief treatment that, centuries into their occupation of the continent, Americans were still ambivalent about their relationship, place, and effect on the natural world. It seemed that the place was neither squarely at the top of the hierarchy nor innocently in the middle, but somewhere far more ambiguous (*Ibid*, 167).

#### *Wilderness recreation and conservation gain a foothold*

As definitions of ecology were being sorted out, wilderness recreation experiences were gaining popularity. Some of the first recreation clubs were formed by university students early in the twentieth century at places like Dartmouth and Allegheny College. In 1932 and Intercollegiate College Club Association was formed to organize trip and promote cohesion between universities (Webb, 1). Students were motivated to spend their leisure

time in the out of doors, which, since industrialization was widespread, took on a sense of purity in contrast with city life. It was natural that as pure wilderness changed from a barrier to civilization to a scarce commodity advertised by the National Park Service, men were admonished to go out and test their strength against a calmer, managed wilderness.

At the same time the Director of Forestry for the U.S. Office of Indian Affairs Robert Marshall, for whom the Bob Marshall Wilderness area in Montana is named, was hatching the plan for a wilderness society of his own. In 1935 he and other preservationists formed The Wilderness Society, with the purpose of protecting areas from even the sight or sound of mechanization (Nash, 207). The society's publication highlighted wilderness areas threatened by development.

The rarity of untrdden wilderness at this time afforded America's most scenic areas the kind of protection that would have been unheard of in earlier times. In 1940 a wilderness protection bill died in Congress but was resurrected by Howard Zahniser, the director of the Wilderness Society. He formulated a campaign for wilderness preservation that lasted over a decade, complete with a Library of Congress-conducted survey of American wilderness. He presented his idea for a Congressional bill for preservation to the Sierra Club and a National Citizen's Planning Conference before convincing Senator Hubert Humphrey to present a draft of the bill to Congress. Over 160 sites were selected in the draft for preservation (Nash, 221). In 1964, after much deliberation and alteration that allowed for development in many of the protected areas if the president deemed it "in the national interest," Lyndon Johnson signed the bill for the National Wilderness Preservation System. As Roderick Nash points out in *Wilderness and the American Mind*,

“This hedging was a classic instance of American’s ambivalence about the relative merits of wilderness and civilization” (Ibid, 226). That ambivalence is far from reconciled.

Take the case of Robert Wernick, who in 1965 wrote a guest editorial for *The Saturday Evening Post* proclaiming that development in wilderness areas was a triumph of man over nature, and the groups of unwashed hikers who said otherwise were simply bearded, backpacked bourgeoisie. To those who favored the steady march toward civilization, wilderness was still the Other, the outsider who stood in the way. As Nash writes, “From this point of view wilderness preservationists were not just locking up valuable natural resources but somehow reducing modern man to a degraded and uncomfortable primitive state” (Ibid, 240). There still existed a dichotomy within some American minds that there were only two options: mechanization or primitivism. A marriage of the two still seems farfetched to some. We will revisit the idea of primitivism as an alternative to civilization later in this section.

In the 1960’s ecological concerns changed from the preservation of natural resources (possibly for later use) to a greater focus on the preservation of particular species or the effects of pollution. According to Carolyn Merchant, author of *American Environmental History*, “In general, the shift was away from production goals and toward consumption, health, and quality of life concerns” (194). This time period sparked skepticism towards the government and the scientific community. *Silent Spring* was published in 1962. The Clean Air Act and the Water Quality Control Act were passed in 1963 and 1965, respectively (Merchant, 197). Communication technology may have alienated people from the environment in some ways, but at the same time Americans were able to stay abreast of environmental issues that affected their health and safety,

establishing a different rapport with nature through the lens of an increasingly industrialized population. Though Americans may have mistrusted the government and science concerning environmental regulation, decisions about environmental quality lay increasingly with a science and policy minded elite. Gone was the autonomy of the rugged pioneer with a forest to conquer. Americans had begun to fight themselves instead of wilderness for survival.

### *Surviving the wilderness of the American mind*

It was amidst this social climate of recreation, preservation, expansion, and development that one of the first wilderness survival schools came into being. Outward Bound originated in the UK in order to increase the survivorship of young British sailors in WWII who were unused to life at sea. Led by Kurt Hahn, the training program was a success in lowering the death rate during naval battles. The model soon spread to include other forms of outdoor recreation and, in 1962 Joshua Miner brought the Outward Bound concept to the United States by starting a chapter in Colorado (Watters, 106).

The purpose of modern Outward Bound programs is many-faceted. The school's international website offers a series of bullet points meant to neatly display a philosophy that will necessarily play out in different fashions for each student. For instance, the classes are meant to develop "capacities of mind, body, and spirit to better understand one's responsibilities to self, others, and community." ("More Philosophy"). Instructors hope to instill "self-knowledge," "craftsmanship," physical fitness," and the "ability to transcend self-imposed limits."

Outward Bound participants learn basic outdoor skills, such as orienteering,

backpacking, first aid, and shelter construction, among others. But Outward Bound was more than just an instructional experience—it was also a result of and response to current events and the effects of living in an increasingly industrialized world. Though there were no more American frontiers to explore, people still had frontiers to conquer within themselves:

It was no coincidence that Outward bound grew rapidly during the turbulent 60's, an era of freedom marches, student protests, and peace rallies. To many youth who signed up for courses, the Outward Bound experience offered a back-to-nature alternative from their image of a chaotic and mad world. The syllogism was that since government and society were so corrupt, the world of the outdoors, untouched by government and society, was good" (Watters, 106).

Outward Bound is one of the most well-known survival schools, with literature and reflections to accompany it. However, a few other wilderness survival schools cropped up around the same time. The National Outdoor Leadership program (NOLS) started in 1965 and seems similar in some ways to Outward Bound. From their "Missions and Values" section of the NOLS website: "We define wilderness as a place where nature is dominant and situations and their consequences are real. Living in these conditions, away from the distractions of modern civilization fosters self-reliance, judgment, respect, and a sense of responsibility for our actions" ("Mission") But the rest of the wilderness values reflect the company's birth during the decade of "greater social consciousness": "[Wilderness] can also be a profoundly moving experience that leads to inspiration, joy and commitment to an environmental ethic" (Watters, 108). In addition the school

focuses on the value of leadership, responsibility, and teamwork, just like Outward Bound (“Mission”).

Larry Dean Olsen, author of the classic *Outdoor Survival Skills*, started the Boulder Outdoor Survival School (BOSS) in 1968. According to the BOSS website, Olsen wanted to challenge the leisurely city lifestyle: “Mental toughness and the ability to adapt to harsh conditions were no longer common character traits. To deal with this situation, Larry created a wilderness program featuring specific physical and mental obstacles that would produce more adaptable and resourceful people” (“History”). The emphasis is not overtly about an environmental ethic, although the Colorado landscape figures heavily among the website images. The focus is on the students: the skills they will learn and the hardships they will have to endure in order to gain that knowledge. The key is the *survival* component of wilderness survival schools. “If you want to relax and be catered to, please consider something other than a BOSS Field Course” (*Ibid*).

The prices of the programs reflected reflect the school’s birth during an economically prosperous time as well. These were (and often still are) programs catering to a certain demographic: those who could afford the commodity of wilderness recreation and the time to disappear into the wilderness. “Although most students who participated in outdoor program activities in those days were not wealthy, a high proportion came from middle or upper-class families” (Watters, 109). Although free wilderness programs and societies are still prevalent, the survival of these schools through the years proves that there is a small, vibrant market for skills that are, at least from a practical standpoint, obsolete in a culture replete with modern technology.

In this case history does repeat itself. Perhaps one of the drawbacks of the

wilderness experiences, at least in terms of convincing people that wilderness has intrinsic value, is that wild areas are not always accessible. Now and in the past, portions of the population have been either physically or financially unable, or reticent, to explore wilderness. So it makes sense that, when wilderness recreation is available to only a select few, its capabilities are limited to those who experienced its joys of have other reasons to value wild places.

We have a situation in which wilderness recreation is rare—because so much of it has been developed and also because some remaining wilderness areas are in areas that only a small percentage of the population are able to explore (for example mountainous areas)—and also expensive, making it a luxury. Not a birthright—a privilege. It is increasingly difficult to have a “pure” wilderness experience, and even more difficult describing what pure wilderness would be like. Does wilderness exclude humans or can people who are so divided from nature they need training to be outside be integrated into the wilderness ideal?

#### *Wilderness survival schools—reprogramming the Western mind*

A certain genre of wilderness survival schools caters to the idea that, with some training, humans can live in relative harmony with the natural world. What “harmony” could mean in present times is different for each school, although there is a common thread. The Wilderness Awareness School, founded in Duvall, WA, in 1983 is an example of a school that teaches a reverence for nature; their vision is “to reach out with our teachings until there's a related nature awareness school in every region, a mentor in every neighborhood, a naturalist in every family and compassion for each other and the earth in

every heart” (“About WAS”).

Earthwalk Northwest, founded in 1995, is another example; they “recognize that the work of mastering traditional skills is a vehicle for reconnecting people with the earth, enabling them to become effective caretakers” (“About the School”). In the yearlong Primitive Living Skills Apprenticeship, “Students learn to appreciate themselves and their community through direct interaction with the many gifts of Mother Earth” (*Ibid*).

Tom Brown Jr.’s Tracker School is well-known among people with an interest in survival and tracking skills, primarily due to his first book, *The Tracker*, published in 1978. The book chronicles Brown’s childhood in the New Jersey Pine Barrens, a few miles off the southern Jersey coast. *The Tracker* tells the story of Brown’s friendship with a boy named Rick and his Grandfather, also called Stalking Wolf, who was an Apache with incredible skill. According to Brown, Stalking Wolf taught them, “how to make use of everything, to live with the least disruption of the earth, to revere what we took from the woods, to hone our special skills sharper and sharper, to expand our sense and our awareness, to live sharper, to expand our senses and to understand eternity” (Brown, “Tracker,” 12). That is an exhaustive list for Grandfather, who spent his entire life in natural purity and piety. He roamed the earth in an idealized fashion, learning wilderness survival and spiritual techniques until he attained the patient sagacity of a Buddhist monk. Grandfather represents the ideal steward of the Earth with a capital “E,” a man with Native American affiliations but worldly knowledge, a globally conscious citizen with an environmental ethic that borders on sainthood.

Brown’s emphasis is on a blend of traditional survival knowledge, with the aim of

connecting students with nature and building on survival techniques that will help the student to survive in nature with less gear—all of that will be provided by wilderness resources such as rawhide, hardwoods, and flintknapped stone. He also focuses on an eclectic blend of earth-centered philosophies; the philosophy course overview states that, “While it is based on Native American philosophy, Stalking Wolf found many truths common to all mankind throughout his years of extensive wandering” (“Philosophy”). It is not readily apparent what specific native groups he uses as a basis for his curriculum, and Brown seems to be taking advantage of the recent surge of interest in Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).

TEK is multicultural, indigenous knowledge that “interprets how the world works from a particular cultural perspective” (Snively, 8). The phrase was coined in the 1980’s. Western science as it is taught in many schools precludes TEK, which some researchers find to be to the detriment of science education. As Gloria Snively, et al wrote in *Discovering Indigenous Science*, “WMS [Western modern science] has been implicated in many of the world’s ecological disasters,” while “TEK is particularly rich in time-tested approaches that foster sustainability and environmental integrity” (*Ibid*, 6). The environmental appeal behind TEK is that it is the result of the many years of an indigenous culture’s contact with nature, and is associated with a holistic viewpoint of the environment. “The oral narratives of the Northwest Coast, for example, describe origins and residency in terms of Creation and the Great Flood, and they perceive a world in which humans, nature, and the supernatural are inextricably linked” (*Ibid*, 14). The information is passed on verbally in stories that use metaphor.

The Tracker School seems to follow both the school of thought within TEK

(reverence for plants and animals, humans and nature in a non-hierarchical relationship), and the methodology. Many lessons are given in the form of a story and, while the veracity of the events is difficult to establish, the meaning is clear: reverence for nature is necessary for the survival of life on this planet. Brown tells stories of tricking polluters and partiers in the Pine Barrens, stories in which he is often shaking with rage at the environmental damage being done to his home. His elaborate schemes to drive polluters away sometimes end with a narrow escape in which his environmental vigilanteism is almost discovered, but the stealthy scout Brown escapes in the nick of time. Again, it's not the content that is of sole importance here, but the underlying message: with a proper reverence for the environment and lots of practice one can become a shadow, capable of protecting the environment and generally pranking people on a whole new psychological level. But Brown doesn't prank people—his stories display that he is very selective about his targets. Only the unaware polluter, the loud biker, the semi driver burning tires at an illegal campsite, bear the brunt of Brown's wrath. Thus the method and the message are buried within layers of heroics. TEK trumps the layers of technology that modern people wrap themselves in to feel safe.

## **Content Analysis**

Wilderness survival schools rely primarily on Internet advertising to inform prospective clients about the schools' philosophies and programs. While at first glance the exchange of information from school to client seems straightforward, much of the information is conveyed through images on the school websites. The images can be photographs of the school founders and employees, school activities, landscapes, or

animals, or simple line drawings of historical characters that make up the school's "mythology" of sorts. Regardless, the pictures allow the potential student to understand very quickly what types of information or skills will be presented at survival schools; the format of the presentation; and what types of people frequent the survival schools.

Reading literature or scanning Web pages is one way of getting information about the schools, but seeing other people involved in physical activity is a very concrete way to gain an understanding of the physical experience one might have while immersed in the culture particular to a school.

With this in mind, as well as information gained about historical American attitudes towards nature, I hypothesized that, wittingly or not, wilderness survival schools sent very specific messages about attendees and activities through advertising images. After perusing a few sites, I made a set of predictions about the images I would find by looking at multiple wilderness school sites. I predicted that more males would be depicted than females in photographs; that people depicted would be primarily Caucasian; that modern technology would be rarely depicted in the images; and that there would be multiple images of Native Americans, as Native Americans are often held up as the standard by which serious survivalists should compare themselves.

### *Methods*

The method of content analysis was used to quantify the images from Web advertisements. "Content analysis finds patterns in information through a process of coding and categorizing specific textual, visual, or vocal elements...Content analysis of visual images has primarily focused on measuring information in advertisements (Larsen,

210). Content analysis categories were also chosen based on the themes found to be apparent in initially observed images. These themes included groups based on the pictures' background, non-human subjects, human subjects and their activities and mode of dress, and presence of technology. There were 37 analysis categories that provided a "dictionary" upon which to base image themes. Each picture was coded based on the presence of these themes, and pictures could have characteristics of multiple themes.

After scanning multiple sites for images I decided to create two categories of wilderness survival schools. One category would be adventure survival schools, where wilderness recreation, team-building exercises, and self-reflection were the cornerstones of the experience. The second type of school I dubbed naturalist survival schools. Websites for these schools stressed a reverence for nature and activities designed to enhance a sense of communion with the natural world. These schools, in contrast with the adventure schools, were more stationary and did not require arduous desert hikes or other recreational activities. School mission statements were used to determine which category the school fit. While the schools taught the same or similar skills sets (survival skills, building primitive tools, backpacking with less gear and learning how to use the gear you have) they used different methods to promote the schools' philosophies. It seemed interesting to find out if the predictions held true for both schools and if the schools used different images as readily as they used different rhetoric in their Internet advertising.

Five schools were chosen to represent each category. Adventure schools, based on mission statements, were Boulder Outdoor Survival School (B.O.S.S.), National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), Outward Bound, Northwest School of Survival (NWSOS), and Mountain Shepherd. Chosen for the naturalist school category were Earthwalk

Northwest, Tracker School, Earthsong Wilderness Adventure, Earth School, and Hollowtop Outdoor Primitive School. Approximately 20 images (give or take a few) were coded from each school, with a total of 200 images coded from both main school categories. Figure 1 below shows the list of categories used to code the pictures and Figure 2 shows an example of coded images.

**In presence or absence of people:**

- 35. Desert
- 37. mountains
- 1. Landscape
- 2. Animal
  - a. whole dead animal
  - b. live animal
  - c. pieces of animal
  - d. tracks
- 3. Plant
  - a. living
  - b. construction material/ as resource
- 4. Shelter
- 5. Desert
- 6. Forest
- 7. Fire
- 8. Water
- 9. Food
- 10. Hand-craft materials
- 11. Primitive tools
- 12. Weapons
- 13. Native American style artifact

**Presence of people:**

- 14. Teacher present
- 15. Children present
- 16. Multiple people
- 17. Individuals
- 18. Males
- 19. Females
- 20. Caucasian
- 21. Non-white
- 22. Native Americans
- 23. Just hands

**Activities**

- 24. Hiking
- 25. Sitting/crouching
- 26. Standing
- 27. Preparing food/eating
- 28. Hand crafts/ practicing skills
- 29. Using primitive weapons
- 30. Building shelters
- 36. Recreational sports
- 31. Other?9

**Modern Technology**

- 32. Present (from modern buildings to helmets/outdoor equipment to vehicles; does not include clothing)

**Fashion**

- 33. Native American (usu. buckskin or hand woven items like hats)
- 34. Modern American

Figure 1 shows the main content analysis categories for which each image was coded. The images displayed at least one if not more of the categories, and most of the pictures were coded with multiple categories.

**Tracker School**

front banner	3a						
Front banner	6	17	19	20	28	33	
front banner	7	17	19	20	28	33	
front banner	3a	6	17	18	20	28	33
front banner	14	16	18	20	31	34	
school logo	2b	2c	13				
brown pic about us	6	14	17	18	20	28	34
brown pic 2 about us	7	14	18	20	34		
brown pic tim brown jr	6	3a	14	17	18	20	26 34
t3	6	3a	14	17	18	20	28 34
FAQ cedar pond	3a	3b	6				
current news	3a	16	19	20	28	33	
contact us	17	19	20	28	33		
philosophy	13						
teaching	3a	6	14	17	18	20	25 34
healing	3a	6					
vision	2b	3a	6				
scout	3a	8	6				
survival skills	3a	3b	10				

Figure 2 is an example of the coded pictures from a school. This excerpt is from an Excel spreadsheet that contains all of the images in code form. The far left column gives the name of the image. To the right of each image name is a string of numbers that corresponds to the content categories. For example, the image “survival skills” was coded with 3a (living plants present), 3b (plants as a resource present), and 10 (hand-craft materials present).

Once the images were coded separate charts were created for adventure schools and naturalist schools. These charts depicted the schools with each content category as a percentage of the school total and as a percentage of the schools as a whole. Figure 3 below is an excerpt of one of these charts from two of the adventure schools.

<b>Content Categories</b>	<b>Mountain Shepherd</b>	<b>B.O.S.S.</b>
<b>Number of images</b>	20.0% [20]	20.0% [20]
<b>Background</b>		
1. Gen. landscape	5.0 [1]	20.0 [4]
2. Animal		
a. whole dead animal	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]
b. live animal	0.0 [0]	5.0 [1]
c. pieces of animal	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]
d. tracks	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]
3. Plant		
a. living	85.0 [17]	70.0 [14]
b. as resource	15.0 [3]	25.0 [5]
4. Shelter	10.0 [2]	0.0 [0]
6. Forest	80.0 [16]	10.0 [2]
7. Fire	15.0 [3]	25.0 [5]
8. Water	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]
9. Food	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]
10. Hand-craft materials	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]
11. Primitive tools	0.0 [0]	10.0 [2]
12. Weapons	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]
13. Native American-style artifact	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]
<b>Presence of people</b>		
14. Teacher	15.0 [3]	10.0 [2]
15. Children	5.0 [1]	5.0 [1]
16. Multiple people	40.0 [8]	45.0 [9]
17. Individuals	50.0 [10]	30.0 [6]
18. Males	80.0 [16]	55.0 [11]
19. Females	10.0 [2]	45.0 [9]
20. Caucasian	90.0 [18]	65.0 [13]
21. Non-white	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]
22. Native Americans	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]
23. Just hands	5.0 [1]	5.0 [1]

<b>Activities</b>			
24. Hiking	0.0 [0]	20.0 [4]	
25. Sitting/crouching	30.0 [6]	10.0 [2]	
26. Standing	30.0 [6]	25.0 [5]	
27. Preparing food/eating	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]	
28. Hand crafts/practicing skills	35.0 [7]	30.0 [6]	
29. Using primitive weapons	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]	
30. Building shelters	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]	
31. Other	5.0 [1]	0.0 [0]	
<b>Modern technology</b>			
32. Present	60.0 [12]	30.0 [6]	
<b>Fashion</b>			
33. Native American	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]	
34. Modern American	90.0 [18]	65.0 [13]	
35. Desert	0.0 [0]	60.0 [12]	
36. Recreational sports	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]	
37. Mountain	0.0 [0]	0.0 [0]	

Figure 3 shows the content categories of two adventure schools, Mountain Shepherd and B.O.S.S. Twenty images were randomly selected from each of these schools and coded as described above. As we can see from this chart, starting with the heading “Background,” 5% of Mountain Shepherd’s selected images contained a wide landscape compared with 20% for B.O.S.S. Moving down the columns, 85% of Mountain Shepherd’s images contained living plants and 0% of B.O.S.S.’s pictures contained living plants. This process was carried out for each of the 10 schools selected for this study.

The schools were then lumped together into their main categories of either adventure or naturalist school. For example, the counts above were added together with the other adventure schools to create a main count for all of the categories depicted in the images. The same was done for the naturalist schools, creating a table with two columns—one for each main type of school. In addition some of the content analysis categories were lumped together. This was done in order to facilitate statistical analysis and because, by the end of categorizing the pictures some categories seemed superfluous. For example, in the “Activities” content category, there were separate categories for practicing skills and building shelters. However, building a shelter does mean that the person depicted is practicing survival skills, and the two categories were lumped together.

For another example, the categories of “whole dead animals” and “pieces of animals” were combined, as these types of images both suggested that the animals were to be used as resources. In addition the categories were rearranged under headings. For example, while “living plants” and “plants as resources” were both originally under a heading called “Background,” in the final analysis they were separated. Counts of living plants in pictures were included under the new heading “Landscape/non-human” while images depicting parts of plants as tools went under the new heading “Resources.” The placement of the content categories under descriptive headings was meant to facilitate statistical analysis, in which the distributions of the images under each main school category (adventure or naturalist) were compared to one another. Figure 4 below shows the new content categories with new headings, as well as the number of images from each main school category that fit into those categories. A comparison of Figures 1 and 4 should make it more obvious how the categories were combined and reworked.

<b>Content Categories</b>	Adventure Schools [100]	Naturalist Schools [100]
Number of images		
<b>Landscape/non-human</b>		
General landscape	11% [11]	20% [20]
Animal life	2% [2]	9% [9]
Living plants	67% [67]	41% [41]
Desert	26% [26]	0% [0]
Mountains	10% [10]	0% [0]
Forests	37% [37]	25% [25]
Water	9% [9]	12% [12]
<b>Resources</b>		
Dead/parts of animals	0% [0]	15% [15]
Parts of plants	13% [13]	43% [43]
Fire	9% [9]	12% [12]
Food	0% [0]	12% [12]
Hand-craft materials	3% [3]	43% [43]

<b>General presence of people</b>		
Teacher present	14% [14]	20% [20]
Children present	3% [3]	14% [14]
Multiple people	48% [48]	34% [34]
Individuals	38% [38]	35% [36]
<b>Gender</b>		
Males	53% [53]	59% [59]
Females	26% [26]	29% [29]
<b>Race</b>		
Caucasian	78% [78]	65% [65]
Non-white	1% [1]	6% [6]
<b>Recreational activities</b>		
Hiking	10% [10]	2% [2]
Recreational sports	15% [15]	0% [0]
Other	1% [1]	8% [8]
<b>Skills</b>		
Preparing food/eating	0% [0]	9% [9]
Hand crafts/practicing skills	29% [29]	32% [32]
Using primitive weapons	0% [0]	1% [1]
<b>Modern technology present</b>	50% [50]	21% [21]
<b>Fashion</b>		
Native American	0% [0]	12% [12]
Modern American	82% [82]	57% [57]

Figure 4 shows the final count of images for each content category

A Chi-square test of homogeneity would have compared the distributions of the adventure and naturalist schools and measured whether or not the image differences were statistically significant. Unfortunately the presence of zeros in some of the categories made it impossible to perform a valid Chi-square test, which assumes that the value for each category is at least five. The chart below shows the categories for which a count of zero was recorded.

<b>Content Categories</b>	<b>Adventure Schools</b>	<b>Naturalist Schools</b>
Desert	26% [26]	0% [0]
Mountains	10% [10]	0% [0]
Dead/parts of animals	0% [0]	15% [15]
Food	0% [0]	12% [12]
Recreational sports	15% [15]	0% [0]
Preparing food/eating	0% [0]	9% [9]
Using primitive weapons	0% [0]	1% [1]
Native American fashion	0% [0]	12% [12]

Figure 5 shows the final categories for which zero was recorded for both types of schools.

While it was not possible to perform the statistical analysis, it was still possible to address the original predictions. Rather than being a hindrance, the zero values added another dimension to the content analysis. What follows is a discussion of the content analysis process.

#### *Content Analysis Discussion*

The original predictions were as follows: males would be depicted than females in photographs; people depicted would be primarily Caucasian; modern technology would be rarely depicted in the images; and there would be multiple images of Native Americans.

The prediction that males would be in more images than females was borne out in both school categories. In both adventure and naturalist schools there were 53 and 59 photographs of men and 26 and 29 images of women, respectively (remember that these categories can overlap and these are not photographs with solely men or women). This gender discrepancy was unsurprising, and reflected my own experience at the Tracker

School—despite the gender-neutral atmosphere there were more men than women there. These are the images that the schools *choose* to promote themselves, and my single experience at a wilderness school cannot allow generalization. It is impossible to tell the gender make-up of each class based on website images. However, a study conducted by the USDA Forest Service in 2005 found that the “typical participant in outdoor recreation is white, male, able-bodies, well-educated, and above average income” (Murphy, 14). So while I do not have demographic information on these wilderness schools, we are able to safely infer that these schools know their audience and are depicting males as a reflection of their student bodies’ dominant gender as well as a marketing tool to capture the gender that will be most likely to attend.

This leads into a discussion of race in the images depicted in advertising. Another unsurprising result of content analysis was that the people photographed were primarily Caucasian: at the adventure and naturalist schools there were 78 and 65 whites pictured, compared to 1 and 6 non-whites depicted. One must keep in mind that these numbers are not entirely accurate due to the subjective nature of deciding race from glancing at a picture, and in instances where race was not readily apparent that information was not categorized.

Still, multiple factors could make Caucasians the overwhelming majority at wilderness survival schools. One issue is cost—with a week of survival training costing almost \$1,000, these schools are a luxury. Assuredly many non-whites could afford wilderness survival training, but there is well-documented racial inequality as concerns poverty levels. It is more likely that a white person can afford this luxury than a person of color. In addition the Forest Service study quoted above also mentioned that there is a

negative correlation between race and wilderness recreation, possibly “due to geographic distribution of Black populations” (*Ibid.*). This is because people are most likely to visit a wilderness area close to home, possibly due to the expense of travel. In addition the forest service found that “Blacks, Latinos, and Asians are less likely than whites to say they have ever visited a wilderness area” (*Ibid.*). This disparity is well recorded in advertising images.

The presence of modern technology was a little more difficult to puzzle out. Modern technology for this study was characterized by any image that contained modern tools or materials. If an image had a camera, tarp, modern furniture, or vehicle in it, the picture was categorized with modern technology images. The category was strictly defined. I was so strict with this category because of my assumptions about technology and survival schools—since they teach people to survive with fewer tools it made sense that their advertising images would reflect the schools’ rhetoric.

This assumption was not validated by the images. Adventure school advertising showed 50 images of modern technology, while naturalist schools contained 21 images of technology. However, the technology depicted was different between the two school categories. Despite the faulty prediction, these differences in technology were fascinating.

Adventure schools naturally advertise recreation elements that require more technology than their naturalist school counterparts. For instance, at the adventure school NOLS one might well be taught how to build shelter from debris or filter water with grasses and charcoal, or even how to make a fire with primitive tools. However, one might also learn how to rock climb, which necessitates special gear. The same is true of

other adventure schools. While at the NWSOS one might spend a night in an emergency snow shelter, but emerge the next morning to learn how to ride a snowmobile. At Outward Bound one might spend many nights under the stars with little gear, but that schools also caters to people who want to test their physical and mental limits by white-water rafting or dog sledding. It makes sense that schools that cater to survivalists as well as recreationists and adrenaline seekers would have aspects of modern technology in their advertising.

The case for the naturalist schools is less cut and dry. Yes, there were 21 images with technology. But the content was drastically different from the naturalist schools. For instance, the only vehicle depicted was from the Hollowtop Primitive School—it was an old dusty school bus taking kids to the school. Most of the technology images came from Earthwalk Northwest. Many classes for this school are held within the founders' house, which naturally contained modern technology in the form of a microwave or a clock, or modern furniture. However, these technological images were not an integral part of the advertising—they were incidental background. A majority of the other naturalist school images were taken outside with no technology in sight.

Teachers' and students' clothing as depicted on the websites fit into this technological conundrum. There were two content categories for clothing; one for modern clothing present and one for Native American clothing present. Native American clothing was loosely defined for this study as clothing made from buckskin, bark, or other natural materials. While none of the adventure schools showed people wearing homemade clothing, there were 12 photos from the naturalist schools with buckskin outfits, usually with the people covered in dirt camouflage.

The naturalist schools are associated with a back to nature movement, which can explain both the natural outfits and the types of technology present. These schools advertise that their teachings foster a deeper relationship with nature that precludes the use of modern artifacts. Nature's resources are abundant and mankind can live easily in the woods with a little preparation. This is the reason that the advertisements from naturalist schools, while containing some modern objects, do not have as many or the same types of modern objects as the adventure schools. It would be a poor marketing tactic to advertise a material closeness with the earth and then utilize modern symbols for the websites. The buckskin clothing shows students and teachers at the fruition of their primal powers, able to utilize natural resources for all of life's needs without the involvement of the modern manufacturing process. Whether or not the schools utilize modern equipment or services (which they undoubtedly do in one way or another) is irrelevant when it comes to advertising—showing pictures of the ways in which naturalist schools are dependent upon technology for lighting and cooking would spoil the image.

One notable exception of technological images in naturalist schools is from the Earth School. Bass guitarist Victor Wooten from Bela Fleck and the Flecktones teaches there and at his own wilderness survival / bass guitar camp. There are multiple images of Victor with his electric guitars, both in the woods and in studio portraits. The images are unique among all of the wilderness sites I have seen—apparently his fame as a bassist trumps the expected wilderness school image of natural purity.

The results for Native American images were unexpected. Considering that many survival schools use their interpretations of Native mythology and interactions with wilderness as a standard for their students, the lack of images depicting indigenous

Americans seemed strange. Adventure schools included zero images of Native Americans in their web advertising, and naturalist schools had 3 images of Native Americans in their advertising. Two of these images were line drawings of little children with long black hair, loincloths, and headbands; the third was a sepia-toned photograph of a Native American man wrapped in a blanket with a small feather headdress.

Perhaps the lack of Native images points to the sensitivity of school promoters in using “politically correct” imagery in advertising. Modern indigenous Americans in modern clothing are hardly the basis for a good mythology that would support the survival school fantasy of running around in the woods like Native scouts. Historical pictures of Native Americans may be considered an antiquated appropriation of Native cultural identity and imagery, which may lead most schools to eschew typical photographs or depictions of historical native life. This is interesting given the rhetoric of the pure Native existence espoused on these sites. Perhaps giving Native lip service as inspiration for the schools is considered an homage to Native cultures in a way that use of the images is not.

One last interesting difference between the schools is natural resource use. Once again, the adventure and naturalist schools have similar curriculum, but the use of plants and animals is depicted very differently for these two categories. Naturalist schools showed photographs of people using plants and animals a total of 58 times out of 100 images. In contrast, while adventure schools showed multiple photographs of trees and forests and a few animals, they showed plants as resources a total of 13 times for 100 images and no pictures of animals as resources. Adventure schools still teach students how to identify edible plants or how to use plants as fire making tools, but the images are

almost entirely absent. This probably has to do with the fact that naturalist schools students probably have different expectations about survival school curriculum. If one is largely sedentary at a survival school, one is likely practicing handcraft skills such as making cordage or bowdrills. At an adventure school where one might be hiking or rafting from one camping site to the next, those skills may play second fiddle to the recreation activities and so are absent from the advertisements.

### **Tracker School background, class structure, and analysis**

The concept and application of traditional knowledge intrigued me. How did Brown use appropriated technologies in order to create an extremely successful survival school? What were his methods? And how could he hope to affect the environmental ethics of the thousands of people who have attended his classes? Following is a description of the school, based on my participant-observation as a student at the Standard class for beginning survivalists, interviews with students and Tracker School employees, and Brown's numerous books.

The Tracker School main campus is located in the Pine Barrens, located off of the southeast coast of New Jersey. Tom Brown, Jr., founded the school in 1978, although it has changed locations and grown to include a campus in California and a second location in New Jersey.

Brown's school was founded based on his education in the woods. In his seminal text, *The Tracker*, Brown writes that a friend's grandfather taught him everything that he knows about tracking and the art of wilderness survival. Brown's education with Stalking Wolf, who Brown called Grandfather, began at age 7:

Stalking Wolf was an Apache tracker. He had come to New Jersey to be near his son who was stationed there. His grandson, Rick, was my best friend, and Stalking Wolf taught both of us how we could teach ourselves to track, to stalk, to live in the woods, and to survive there. He gave us the questions that would lead up to our answers, but he never told us an answer. He taught me to see and to hear, to walk and to remain silent; he taught me to be patient and resourceful, how to know and how to understand. He taught me to see invisible things from the trail and all action leaves around us. He taught me how to teach myself the mystery of the track (Brown, “Tracker,” 5).

His experiences in the woods with Rick and Stalking Wolf led to the formation of the present day Tracker School, and his mentor’s teaching method is the basis for the classes.

Every student at the Tracker class has to take the Standard class; it is a prerequisite for further study and a good starting point for research as each student has had at least one similar experience. Students who drive to the class park their vehicles in a strip mall in Waretown, NJ, a twenty minute drive from the school. All students are chauffeured into the camp—no one can drive in or out during the class except staff and volunteers. The vans take students down Route 9 and onto sandy roads into a scrub oak and pitch pine forest, and finally into the camp proper.

The Standard class, like most Tracker School classes, lasts for a week. Students wake up around 6 a.m. (earlier for breakfast crew) and classes end around 11 p.m., with small fires, demonstrations, and discussions lasting into the night. The schedule is intentionally exhausting and, as founder Tom Brown Jr. claims, nothing there is done on

accident. Every aspect of the program is designed to facilitate what Brown considers an optimal learning experience.

I chose the Tracker School as an example of a particular type of survival school. My interest lies in schools that deliberately intend on instilling an environmental ethic, and Brown caters to students who are “...looking for a closer attachment to the Earth, and the skills and philosophy that will help you live in harmony and balance with Creation...” (“About Tracker”). Other schools with a similar focus are covered in a later part of this essay. Schools such as wilderness boot camps for young adults and military-style adventure camps were not relevant to this portion of the project.

Our classes, when we were not receiving a field demonstration, were held in a large open-air structure—basically a roof with support beams with a view of a pine grove. Students washed themselves in buckets or in the stream behind the camp that was colored red from the cedar trees. We took our meals from a large makeshift shelter equipped with multiple stoves. We ate, for the most part, unsweetened grains for breakfast and stew for lunch and dinner. Food became more elaborate as the week waned.

Other structures on campus included a sweat lodge, a fire pit that we would later use, a course for practicing throwing skills, and an alter set up to Grandfather and adorned with jewelry.

Each day we focused intently on new skills, sitting for hours as diagrams, knives, traps, arrowheads, and buckskins were paraded before us. Laminated charts of the previous day’s activity were hung in the back so that students could pore over and photograph them later. The skills that we studied included shelter building, knife sharpening, tanning buckskin, plant identification and usage, flint-knapping, trap

building, making fire, finding potable water, tracking, animal identification from tracks, and enhanced awareness exercises. Most of our time was spent passively learning skills in the open-air shelter. The class format is somewhat due to the large size of the group (around 100 people).

Stories about Grandfather peppered Brown's stories about survival skills. Some people doubt the veracity of Grandfather's existence, and proving whether or not the Grandfather that Brown describes is based on a real person is beyond the scope of this project. Regardless, the mythology of Grandfather serves the school's purpose: to present a larger than life, perfect figure; an environmental hero. Brown is the intermediary between Stalking Wolf and the rest of the world—in *The Tracker* Brown writes that Stalking Wolf and his grandson Rick, Brown's best friend, moved away from New Jersey when Brown was in his teens (Brown, “Tracker” 156). Rick is reported by Brown to have died in a horseback riding accident in Spain and Grandfather is long dead, leaving Brown to disseminate his message.

That message is an entirely reverential perspective of nature with spiritual overtones:

Stalking Wolf did not treat things as separate objects; he treated them as extensions of himself. He wasn't so interested in how things work; he wanted to know what was at the heart of them. He looked at things from the inside out—as part of the landscape and part of the universal life force. There is a great awe and reverence in this kind of observation. In fact, it is a kind of prayer ” (Brown, “Field Guide, 20).

To Brown, everything is “part of the great cosmic unity, the spirit-that-moves-through-

all-things” (Ibid, 21) that connects every living creature and aids in awareness, a component of the Tracker School curriculum.

Grandfather and his environmental ethic are evoked consistently throughout the Standard class and Brown’s 17 books. He made a point in both the class and literature to explain that, when he takes the life of a creature he gives thanks for that animal’s sacrifice. This practice he learned from Stalking Wolf. And the act of learning about the natural world is not a system of memorization or categories, but interaction and observation. This practice goes beyond mere conservation of resources for aesthetic or recreational purposes—this philosophy, if practiced, puts humans into an interactive, prayerful dialogue with literally every living creature.

“From this point of view, ecology takes on a deeper meaning,” (Ibid) states Brown in his *Field Guide to Living with the Earth*. And it is true that he does not present an unbiased, scientific view of the natural world. The world of data collection and dissection do not help Brown or Tracker students gain the awareness of the world that is advertised in his website and books. Instead they try to tap into an intuitive communion with nature to guide their path of study:

We all have a natural reverence for life. Deep down in the roots of our sacred tree, we know we cannot live without taking other life. We also know that we cannot treat other animals as inferiors, because so many are gifted with senses and abilities far greater than our own. We do not have the swiftness of the swallow, the ears of the fox, or the eyes of the eagle. But we can humble ourselves and learn from our animal teachers. (Ibid)

An environmental ethic plays itself out in the sense of a vigilante in his book *The*

*Way of the Scout*. The text is chapter after chapter of diatribes against an unaware and irreverent public that uses the New Jersey Pine Barrens as a dumping ground. In these stories Brown and Rick are sent by Grandfather to teach illegal campers not to litter; sabotage a group of boaters who were dumping beer cans and cigarette butts overboard during a Fourth of July celebration; raid a factory that was dumping pollutants into a river; and crash a war game. He writes that soon after Grandfather left town he chained a man who was dumping chemicals in the Pine Barrens to his own truck. After lecturing the man about stealing the natural wonders of the Pine Barrens from his own grandchildren due to the chemicals, he sets him free (Brown, “TWOTS,” 229).

During this ecological warfare, in which Brown and Rick constantly honed their scout skills against their hapless targets, Grandfather was there, teaching them how hollow it is to live a life unaware of the power of the earth. After sabotaging a war game played with flags, Grandfather explains their opponents shortcomings: “ ‘By not knowing the voices of creation, by not being children of the earth, they do now know what it is to be a true warrior. They do not then possess the power of the earth and creation. These powers are what defeats them and makes the scout victorious’” (Ibid, 137).

Conversations with other students at the Standard class revealed that at least in mind this type of behavior (sabotaging environmental defacers) was at least somewhat acceptable or even inspiring to some. Brown told several stories in the class about his hatred of polluters and illegal dumping, including a story similar to one in *The Way of the Scout*. However, the main foci of the class were survival skills, awareness, tracking, and spiritual reverence, not environmental vigilantism.

However perfect Stalking Wolf appears, Tom Brown, Jr. is just a man. He drinks

coffee and drives a Hummer. He used to smoke Marlboros and recently got divorced. Students who expect to see him stride into camp wearing buckskins and full camouflage will be sorely disappointed. These conundrums are valuable lessons, and though they are likely just expressions of his personality and preferences (the man likes his coffee) they add to the students' unease as they struggle to rectify the images they might hold of him as a primitive eco-warrior with the reality they experience as they adjust to the unfamiliar camp life and its lessons.

Brown uses that confusion to his advantage. He consistently admonished his students throughout the week that we cannot simply take his word that the skills he and his instructors taught were functional; we must try them for ourselves to prove his claims wrong. This served two purposes: first, the student gained the practical knowledge needed when she puts or finds herself in a survival situation, instead of relying on book knowledge. Second, the student was never allowed to wholly depend on Brown or his staff for the expression of this knowledge. We were not allowed to worship at Brown's feet and hope that osmosis would create a font of knowledge in our brains. The focus of the standard class was that we would have the foundation to explore the natural world on our own upon our arrival home, not that we would be forever dependent upon the Tracker School for guidance.

In addition, the paradox that one experiences when meeting Brown (who is a mythological figure in his own right) for the first time serves yet another purpose. If Stalking Wolf contains a spiritual aspect of perfect knowledge and harmony with nature, Brown is his imperfect human counterpart. One can aspire to be Stalking Wolf and achieve that perfect balance. One can see the practical expression of a real human

resonance with and reverence for nature in Brown. And though Brown claims to be able to do things that are supernatural or superhuman, an experience with him in the flesh, with all of his imperfections and the questions that his claims raise, make the skills he is trying to pass on seem more attainable, even if an understanding of the man passing them on isn't.

The environmental ethic that Brown emphasizes is not made to remain within the confines of the school grounds. According to his personal message on the Tracker School website, it is suggested that attendees be "...looking for a closer attachment to the Earth, and the skills and philosophy that will help you live in harmony and balance with creation..." ("About Tracker"). Regardless of the fact that few people will be able to afford the class (currently the Standard class costs \$899 for a week's worth of teaching), students are encouraged to teach the skills and philosophy they learn to others. That was another key theme of the week at Standard class: while we were encouraged to sign up for more classes, we were encouraged even more to share the information with the people in our lives.

The fact that attendees are often versed in environmental ethics to some extent in their lives makes it difficult to judge the transformational process that is advertised in the school website Brown writes, "This school is not for everyone. You must be prepared to see your life and the things around you in a different light; if you are, then apply." (Ibid). Prospective students are warned that they should read Brown's literature before applying so that they are versed in his philosophy before signing up. Perhaps they are already prepared to have a spiritual awakening or experience before attending and Brown is preaching to the choir.

However, the teachers promote open sharing of the information, and Brown almost seems to defeat the purpose of the school from a solely skill-based level by publishing relatively inexpensive instruction manuals for his lessons. This information is meant to be shared, which seems to be Brown's contribution to the environmental movement, as diffuse as that concept may be. Brown is not lobbying for environmental protection, living in a yurt with no electricity, or stalking polluters and tying them up (as far as I know). He is simply talking to thousands of willing participants from all over the globe about his reverence for nature and encouraging them to share their own feelings with others. And he does this through a basically grass-roots effort—the only advertising is on his website or in his books, which people have to willingly access, or word of mouth. Whether students buy wholly into his philosophy or not, he is still affecting a large audience and represents a subset of naturalists that get little media attention aside from those articles that mention the seeming novelty of the schools.

Matthew Corradino, Tracker School instructor, suggests that the school's biggest hidden agenda and contribution to the environmental movement "...is teaching people in a way that causes them to want to reach more people with whatever they do. Our focus is on caretaking and helping people achieve balance with the survival skills and helping the earth become healthier for us living directly off of it...so I think our biggest contribution is that we're sending people out there who are taught in a way that will make them mobilize other people" (Corradino).

Although this explanation may make it seem that Brown is teaching only devoted animists, that is clearly not the case. The spiritual aspect, as he mentioned several times during the Standard class, is there "if you look for it". But he seeks neutrality in the

Standard class in order that people of multiple denominations can attend and feel comfortable. He doesn't push his beliefs on people and explains his spiritual vocabulary—the sacred silence, the-spirit-that-moves-through-all-things, the realm of the spirit—in vague terms, saving the explanations for his philosophy classes (separate from the Standard class).

Not all instructors take this tack. Jorge Brana, another instructor, was blatant during his lesson on wilderness cooking when he gave students fish to gut and prepare. He explained, very sternly, that the fish gave their lives to nourish our bodies and that we ought to be very thankful for that. He recognized that Brown didn't delve too deeply into spiritual teachings that are decidedly foreign to the average American, but went against the grain in his cooking lecture when speaking of a reverence for all living creatures.

It is also helpful that Grandfather, regardless of his Apache heritage, is portrayed as a man of all faiths, a person who could tie cultural heritages to the common thread of wilderness survival. Brown writes that Grandfather studied with wise people of many cultures in order to increase his knowledge (Brown, "TWOTS." 91). And Brown explained in the class and in his books that the skills he teaches are not as a whole particular to one culture otherwise our ancestors would not have survived: "I want to emphasize that the native Americans are not the only ones who used these skills. They have been used by native peoples all over the world, in all ages and places, in response to the changing environment" (Brown, "Field Guide," 15). But to offer another perspective, Corradino stated that the schools' generic appeal to people was frustrating because "...it makes it more acceptable to people who aren't going to take it further with the skills..." which to him are intricately tied to, for lack of a better word, an animistic philosophy

(Corradino).

This common heritage was stressed in the class, perhaps to assuage harsh feelings about appropriating Native American heritages in order to teach mostly Caucasian people how to survive in the wilderness using Native tools. But the fact remains that it is true—in every person's background is a dense history of people who lived in close contact with the earth, manufacturing tools and learning skills necessary for everyday survival. There are people who live in that manner in present times. These skills are neither foreign to Americans nor new.

But it smacks of hypocrisy. The spiritual element permeated every part of the class. So while Brown stated that he wanted to make everyone comfortable with his philosophy we spent time saturated in his philosophy. We heard one heart-tugging story after another about mother earth as an entity whose body is clotted with garbage and chemicals. Sometimes these tales left students, volunteers, and instructors in tears. We spent a week with people who were living out that philosophy—in debris huts and tipis, in close contact with the earth—and it seems impossible to say that the spiritual component was left out, or that students remained unaffected by it, although it's impossible to measure how and how much.

There are aspects of the teaching experience that fail to register until you are miles away from the school with only your cedar bow drill and memories. That's when the reality of coyote teaching sets in. We were admonished to practice our skills (called "dirt time") in order to become more proficient and spend time with the earth. After making a few fires with the bow drill set made at camp, one realizes that it will not work without modification. It is so small due to the materials available that it will eventually

not work at all. You have a list of trees that are good for bow drills, but which tree is which? Suddenly you realize that the information that was handed to you at the school is not the end of the road—it's the beginning. If you wish to utilize the skills you paid dearly for, you will have to do the one thing your instructors practically begged you to do: engage with the natural world around you in a different way. You will have to observe wildlife and plants, get off the trail, and become comfortable in the woods. You will spend lots of time getting to know forest denizens, unless you are prepared to buy every piece of wood or scrap of animal hide you use. And that time you spend outdoors can, they hope, translate into a deeper respect for the world you depend upon to practice your skills.

This class is not a one-size-fits-all solution for environmental woes—not by a long shot. This is just one of many ways to reeducate people about their resource base, the earth they walk upon, the connection they have with something besides a remote control or air-conditioning. If we take Brown at his word, his vision is to reach as many people as possible in order that they might fulfill their appropriate roles in healing environmental damage. Educated people can make more educated choices. Some of Brown's literature describes a vigilante past, but that is not what he emphasizes in class. As instructor Corradino said in an interview, "I do feel that without reeducating people there's no point in protesting [environmental degradation] because you're not getting at the root of the cause, you're just putting a band-aid on it" (Corradino).

A side note: What is so rare about this experience, at least from my perspective: these people have a dedication and focus that I think is rare. If they are sincere, which I have to accept that they are, then they truly have a "vision" that a reacquaintance with the

natural world will make a difference. This is SO different from what I have experienced at university...not that I don't love it, but my education is focused on policy and enacting change through academia and research, the idea that abstractly educated people will have to make the right decision through intellect alone. Tracker School was a tactile education, in which you create a relationship, a friendship, love between self and resources to the point that they aren't resources anymore, they're people to you in the sense that you grant them rights in your mind, you grant them consciousness and equal footing. There is no room for abstraction. Who has time for abstraction in the woods? You learn, not only what to do if you are lost in the woods, but what to do if the loss of self is intentional. It truly is a loss of self, a subordination of the ego to the surroundings and for that reason alone, to heal the gap between self and world, it is a worthwhile experience.

## **Discussion**

The themes that run through Tom Brown's Tracker School are many and at times contradictory. They are also representative of themes and influences that affect survival schools with the similar models. In this section I analyze some of the most pertinent themes of wilderness survival schools, starting with the idea of wilderness education as a commodity. In the historical review of this essay I mentioned that the increasing rarity of American wilderness in the form of undeveloped areas made wilderness more valuable to some people. In the same way, the decreasing numbers of people who practice wilderness skills has driven up the price of that commodity as well.

The practice of survival skills has waned since the industrialization of America, lending modern practitioners a nostalgic air. Many of these skills and practices are linked

back to Native Americans, and the evocation of indigenous peoples in some ways validates survival schools that use Native American art, teaching methods, or stories in their classes. The second part of this discussion focuses on the appropriation of Native American cultures in the Tracker School.

The third section tackles the appeal of survival schools to apocalyptic thinkers. Part of the attraction of the Tracker School is that Brown does predict the destruction of civilization through mankind's folly while simultaneously offering the antidote to the apocalypse: wilderness courses that will aid a student in escaping cities during the inevitable environmental Armageddon due to modern man's hubris. In this section I explain Brown's primary apocalyptic prophecies and analyze their usefulness as marketing tools and powerful messages of environmental advocacy.

The final section ties the Tracker School into a larger social context. While it is impossible to gauge into what part of the environmental "movement" the Tracker School (or any other wilderness school) belongs, the stated philosophy of the school fits well with a few other philosophies, most notably deep ecology and the recently born "rewilding" movement. This section attempts to explain the similarities among these schools of thoughts and offers the idea that wilderness schools inhabit a small and particular part of a wider social landscape. Deep ecology, rewilding, and the Tracker School all remove humans from the top of the biological hierarchy and place them somewhere in the mix, as heirs to traditional wisdom that will somehow set us free from the mindset that makes willful environmental destruction possible.

### *Survival skills as commodity*

It is interesting to note that survival skills, which Brown describes as the heritage of all mankind (else how would our ancestors have survived), are an expensive commodity at the Tracker School. The Standard class, and most other classes that are available to the public, cost between \$699 and \$899 for a week's worth of class. Skills that were once necessary for human survival on the planet are now marketed for a price that most people could never afford.

It is indeed remarkable that these skills, somewhere along the way, made the transition from necessity to commodity. The historical review gives one the idea that technological innovation and civilization made it possible for one to survive without those skills. That is an inherent part of the commodification of traditional skills—they are viewed as unnecessary and now serve as luxury goods or wilderness recreation, regardless of how important the participant may view these skills. Now that survival skills are out of fashion, so to speak, they are the bailiwick of a few people who can charge what they please for the ancestral knowledge. Rarity drives the price of this art.

There are some who believe that, inasmuch as it represents ancestral knowledge, Tracker School should be free, or at least less expensive. “Tracker Trail, a website about Tom Brown, Jr. and the Tracker School” ([www.trackertrail.com](http://www.trackertrail.com)) offers good examples of this. The website submitters have pseudonyms, so it is impossible for a reader to know the veracity of their statements or identities. But they do offer a variety of opinions on the economic side of the Tracker School.

For example, Travis writes, “[Brown] may be a wise man and a great man and a

true caretaker but you must in all honesty acknowledge the fact that Tom Brown is a Capitalistic Entrepreneur. He makes a whole lot more than it takes to run his school. Therefore his primary intention cannot be simply to educate the masses” (Travis). Nachshon writes that Brown is “a millionaire, a liar, and a con man” (Nachshon). He then criticizes Brown’s ethics and calls him a hypocrite for charging money after outlining a moralistic path for “children of the Earth” in his literature.

It is interesting to note that, of the survival schools I have encountered (around 30), with only a few exceptions their rates are comparable to Brown’s: around \$800 for a week’s worth of school. However, the Tracker School is the only school that has a following, with multiple websites dedicated to criticizing the school’s foundation and the morality of accepting payment in return for survival skills. Other schools pass under the radar of scrutiny while collecting similar fees. Brown’s literature and popularity have gained him the negative attention that others have escaped.

It is difficult to decide how much money a person “should” make for his or her time. It appears to many people that Brown makes too much money from his enterprise. At the same time, Brown uses some of the money that he makes in order to buy property in the Pine Barrens and save it from development. He runs a children’s survival program that offers tuition waivers for low-income families. After his philanthropic duties are over, how much income should he be taking home? Who decides what amount of money it is fair for Brown to make in light of his environmental ethic?

On another side of the monetary issue are people who defend Brown’s enterprise, claiming food costs, insurance, employee salaries, and property taxes confound Brown’s ability to offer cheaper or even free classes. One member criticized the idea that teaching

primitive skills and earning wages are mutually exclusive: “Maybe people have put such high standards on him that he can't possibly live by them all...Just because he likes money, it doesn't make him a bad guy. Don't expect him to feed his wife and kids weeds all their lives” (Jeff). It is easy to see that Brown's life, which is mythologized in his books, is idealized in the real world. The expectation exists that Brown should live like an ascetic all the days of his life.

Perhaps Brown encourages idealistic thinking with his advertising. Advertising for the Tracker School comes from Brown's literature, the school website, and word of mouth. The stories are enticing, but potential students with Internet access are assuredly influenced by the site's symbols and design. The most prominent symbol for the Tracker school is a dark green outline of a deer skull. A peace pipe with four hanging feathers pierces the skull and a chickadee perches on top. At the risk of sounding stereotypical the school's icon looks decidedly like a Native American shield. Native American art places his business in a respected historical context—the evocation of indigenous Americans gives his craft an air of authenticity, regardless of its origins.

Brown's picture is prominent in the images that accompany the text when one selects the “About us” link on the website. The top is an action shot of Brown gazing intently at the ground ahead of him. He is presumably tracking, the skill for which he is famous. It is a pose that presupposes his mastery of the skill—a small reassurance that Brown can actually perform that of which he boasts, standing in the stead of actually observing Brown. Beneath that is the solemn image of Brown's head, gray-haired, with a fire in the background. In his maturity he has attained a grandfatherly image, and he has recently become a grandfather in life. Brown is seated between the observer and the fire,

acting as a gatekeeper for the skill that is so primal and emphasized in many survival courses: the ability to make fire without flint or gas. Brown has achieved the position that Stalking Wolf had in his life: the guardian of wisdom.

The rest of the site's images are of two types: scenic or student based. Of the pictures with human figures most are covered in dirt and ash camouflage, reflecting the school's reputation as a "scout" training camp—the idea of going undetected in the wilderness is prevalent in just the Standard course. Again there is the image of fire in a photograph that depicts a camouflaged girl kneeling close to a fire. Other images show the cedar-water swimming hole or oak leaves—a taste of the natural surroundings the camp offers. What is conspicuous in its absence is technology or evidence of civilization, a theme that runs through the advertising of many survival school sites. The only images of technology available on the site are for sale: audio books, water bottles, and other promotional materials. The t-shirts, hats, bags, and audio book covers are all earth tones to help them blend in with the school's overall theme.

The Wilderness Awareness School in Duvall, WA also displays fire on its homepage (<http://www.wildernessawareness.org/>). It also features another common image, that of an instructor in the field close to the earth, sharing survival information. An older student shows what look like vertebrae to younger students in one photo, and in another several adults sit on the grass with elementary-aged kids. It appears that they are sharing stories. Children feature heavily in this site's advertisement, emphasizing involvement of people of all ages. The mascot is a coyote, referencing the coyote teaching method used at some schools. The coyote represents the trickster in indigenous lore, though the coyote archetype is represented in many different, sometimes

contradictory ways (Hymes, 109). The Wilderness Awareness School promotes coyote teaching as a holistic method that uses storytelling and humans' innate curiosity to instill knowledge. In other words, a student answers his or her own questions through observation and research. The teacher facilitates learning, but is not there to serve as the student's sole source of knowledge ("Coyote Mentoring"). Again, technology is conspicuously absent except in the school's online store.

The same themes are repeated on the website for the First Earth Wilderness School in Rogersville, MO. Instructors are bent over the ground, teaching children the art of bow-drill. It's interesting to note that in many of these photographs people are kneeling or sitting on the ground. The symbols for the First Earth School are a satellite image of the earth next to a drawn black and white image of a man's hands working a hand drill. The hands overlap the image of an arrowhead and a piece of leather is wrapped around the man's wrist. As arrowheads and primitive fire techniques are associated with Native Americans, this symbol seems to draw on that heritage. The juxtaposition of the globe, created by scientific advancements in satellite imagery, and the drawn, nostalgic figure can be seen either as an unintentional contradiction or a statement about wilderness skills: they are relevant and contemporary with modern technology.

Thomas J. Elpel is well-known for his books *Botany in a Day* and *Participating in Nature*. He also runs the Hollowtop Outdoor Primitive School in Silver Star, MT. His site repeats the same images: instructors demonstrating bow drill; students sitting on the ground talking or engaged in lessons; a hand drawn picture of a young boy dressed in buckskin with a headband and moccasins. In the drawn image a fish is jumping out of the

water to greet the smiling boy in an unlikely gesture of kinship. A photograph of Elpel shows him in a canoe, dressed in skins and wearing a bark hat to shade his face from the sun. The only image of modern technology is, again, promotional or educational materials, and one photo of a dusty school bus that seems to be taking students to camp.

Cody Lundin's Aboriginal Living Skills site repeats the same themes: people in front of a fire. Majestic scenes of Arizona mountains, some with students and some without. Lundin is a prominent figure on the homepage, barefoot with long decorated braids and a bandana. A southwestern-style belt hugs his waist and a large silver pendant dangles from a leather thong around his neck. Beautiful Arizona wilderness is behind him. He stands, like Brown, as the gatekeeper of knowledge that can turn the forbidding desert into home.

The PAST Skills Wilderness School is no different. The homepage features a hand drill and homemade arrow points and arrows. Photographs on the site feature the Montana wilderness, students bent over their hand crafts, and wolf tracks. The site is in sepia tones, evoking a sense of aging, an elegant weathering with time and the wisdom that supposedly accompanies that aging.

Earthwalk Northwest School in Issaquah, WA repeats these thematic images. So does the Earth School in Tryon, NC (with the exception of a photo montage of one of the instructor's electric guitars). And Heart Teachings with Old Turtle in Canaan, ME (Old Turtle is instructor Ray Reitze). And Lifesong Wilderness Adventures in North Bend, OR. The list could continue, but suffice it to say that the instructors and web designers are using specific symbols to advertise the survival school experience, playing on the expectations of potential clients.

The web images advertise a number of qualities to potential clients. As I mentioned before, the school founder is often posed alone, in the midst of teaching or performing some skill. His or her presence (and most of the founders are male) validates the school—the founder embodies some of the ideals or the reputation of the school's quality. The natural images—those of wilderness seemingly untouched by mankind—express that the people who are attending these classes can hope to develop a closer relationship with those wild places. Instead of living within the historical burden of fear and superstition of wilderness that modern colonists carry within their psyches, students can become “natives” of their home lands, integral parts of landscapes. Photos of plants and animals show the natural inhabitants that apprentice natives can relate to with time and practice.

Children are often the subjects of these pictures, as if to remind survival school clients that these skills are not just luxury items for grown-ups. Inasmuch as these schools are catalysts for a new environmental consciousness, children represent a vital link in that shift in consciousness. Their proximity to the ground in the photos—usually squatting over a craft or sitting on the ground—represents their closeness to nature, or at least a closeness to that divine state of an open vessel, ready to receive information, that we suppose a child's mind to be.

The lack of technology in the pictures is intriguing. While one gets the sense that a student will ascend to a state of asceticism in technology at a survival school, the information is available on the Internet, where one must be slightly tech savvy to find it. This contradiction warrants further study—one uses technology to gaze into an alternative method of human survival, a situation in which the tool of advertisement (a

computer) becomes obsolete.

At no time are we made aware that the marketing images represent a rare world. While somewhat obsolete in a modern technological society, physical survival skills are useful to a person desiring to strike off into the wilderness with a light pack, or to someone threatened by exposure or dehydration while camping. However, wilderness areas untouched by development are rare. It's possible to hike right off the Appalachian trail into a city, or stumble across other accoutrements of civilization in the wild. The images of nature on websites give people an idea not only of the context for skills use, but also the idea that one can find a wild frontier, despite the fact that out of the sight of the observer lurks the photographer, digital camera in hand. There are many tensions and contradictions inherent in advertising a wilderness based school in modern America.

#### *Native American symbolism*

Brown patterns his class after lessons he learned from Grandfather, whose ancestry is described as Lipan Apache. Brown's Native American characterization extends throughout his literature and Tracker classes—the subtitle of Brown's book, *The Way of the Scout*, reads “A Native American path to finding spiritual meaning in a physical world” (Brown, “TWOTS,” cover). Brown conducted the Standard class sweat lodge in another language, which he stated was an Apache prayer. The meaning was unmistakable—upon exiting the earthen, womb-like sweat lodge we had been born anew as creatures with entirely new perspectives on our relationships with the natural world. All of these aspects reveal that his programs are deeply influenced by his interpretation of Native American lore.

One look at Brown's blue eyes and sunburned skin identifies him as Caucasian, although he has appropriated many Native American symbols to define his school (or at least what Europeans consider to be Native American cultural artifacts). His motives for doing so are not readily apparent. It may be that he reveres Native American cultures or romanticizes the indigenous American lifestyle; it may be a good catch-all characterization for his school, although he claims to teach survival skills from all over the globe; it may be simply a gimmick. It may be that his teacher instilled the sense that Native American scouts were the best examples of wilderness survival and he modeled his own school off that concept. Speculations about Brown's motivations are futile.

However, the use of those indigenous symbols and skills is highly visible at his school and in his written works. Again from *The Way of the Scout*, Brown states that Grandfather trained his to be an Apache scout. Here is his description of the ideal scout: "The scouts, beyond being secretive, were the best survivalists and trackers and the most highly aware individuals, most attuned to the earth and the spirit-that-moves-through-all-things" (3). If a scout (meaning Brown) struggled to find comfort in the natural world, it was because his skills were unpracticed. "To the scout, the wilderness had to be his home. He had to live in perfect balance and harmony with creation and follow its laws" (7).

Brown evokes the idea of indigenous Americans as stewards of the earth in an interview with primitive.org. The anonymous interviewer asks a question with the stereotypical natural purity of Native Americans in mind; he or she calls their cultures and spiritual practices, "seamless; each based on a deep respect for the Earth" ("Interview"). Brown answers that people who spend some time in nature, even those

without faith, will “suddenly realize that there is a creator. They have this whole spiritual contact” (*Ibid*). He also contrasts the European way of environmental concern as resource based with the idea that “a true survivalist is a caretaker of the earth…They are not just a caretaker, they’re a healer. We’re not a mistake from the Creator. We belong here and if we do this correctly as a survivalist, we are as important as the wolf is to the deer herd or the fox is to the rabbit population” (*Ibid*). His written literature is rife with references to Native American healers and environmental stewards that differ greatly from resource driven concepts that characterize government based stewardship of nature exhibited by organizations such as the USDA Forest Service.

There is also the aspect of purity in Brown’s descriptions of indigenous Americans—as if the historical Native American, untouched by capitalism, television, or food additives is somehow cleaner, more adept at being alive in the “real world” (wilderness) than modern Caucasians. Surely much of this is correct—the average urban dweller, dropped off in trackless forest, might have difficulties with finding adequate shelter or potable water. But the pure white light surrounding Brown’s evocation of Native Americans serves a purpose: it mythologizes Native American cultures, subjecting their recorded histories to interpretation that serves the Tracker School. In the same way that Stalking Wolf serves as the school’s mascot, representing an unattainable perfection that the initiate can only dream of attaining, the sanctity of the image of Native Americans that Brown fosters offers students another measure of perfection by which to measure themselves. They may fall short, but they will have a mythology to guide them.

Brown also uses Native American culture and landscape as a context for the small community of trackers he continues to build at his school. Although he stated many times

in lectures that these skills were our common heritage, the purpose of the school isn't to simply offer a glut of physical skills. Another purpose is to introduce people to the surrounding environment in an intimate fashion. There is a system of ideals at the Tracker School: that indigenous Americans were physically and spiritually more capable than European conquerors at managing resources; that the natives didn't think of the environment as a system of resources anyway; that nature based spirituality is relevant in the modern world; that modern humans' sensory engrossment with the natural world, along with a new perspective gained at the school, will help Caucasians and other urban dwellers find the enlightenment associated with indigenous Americans, perhaps even replacing them on the landscape. These are not stated goals, rather, implicit ones that perhaps go along with the territory of appropriating other cultures, whatever the motivations.

In addition, class attendees, at least those that are familiar with Native American occupation of the land, will have the background on which to base their new-found Tracker School perspective. Basing an American school on indigenous ideas and stereotypes seems completely appropriate in this case—the cultural groups being used as an example are already mythologized through literature, and are widely unavailable to either dispute the claims of purity or provide a contradictory example.

Books on the purity and stewardship of Native American thought abound in academic settings as well as literature of the new age movement. Charles Mann attempts to dispel the modern mythology of Native Americans is his book *1491*: "...the idea that Indians were suspended in time, touching nothing and untouched themselves, like ghostly presences on the landscape" (Mann, 246). In contrast, he writes, "...it is apparent that

many though not all Indians were superbly active land managers—they did not live lightly on the land” (Ibid, 248). Mann offers the native shaping of forests and plains by fire, the great mounds built by the Ouachita, and native agriculture as a few examples. While it makes perfect sense that Native Americans did not hover divinely above the landscape, but changed it as surely as any other living creature, it is not apparent that attendees to the myth of native purity have puzzled out that fact. Or perhaps they have and the conclusion that they have come to is that of all the models of humanity we have, this is a worthy one to emulate.

The idea of appropriating native culture, whether it is a true representation or one that has been mythologized, is troubling. Fictitious representations, regardless of motivations, can consume the reality of the peoples’ lives being emulated. In writing of photographs on Native Americans made in the early 1900’s, Mick Gidley explains that,

What such representations in fact offer are varying *illusions* of reality...in no sense do I mean to suggest that they function only as symbols of something much more important, and lying behind them, as it were, in real life; rather these representations have in turn acted to *constitute* “reality” for the cultures that produced and consumed them (Kalshoven, 5).

In addition, European depictions of the perfection of indigenous Americans give us the chance to push indigenous lives in the far past. We resurrect their ideas when we see fit—for example, when running a survival school. They are used to represent an idyllic past when in fact their lifestyles were contemporaneous with those of the recent Caucasian ancestors emigrated to America (Kalshoven, 103).

Outwardly it appears that Brow has the noblest of ideals to proselytize when using

native images: environmental stewardship. Again, in the interview with primitive.org,

I've been seriously concerned with the route the Earth is taking. Things falling apart, frogs disappearing, as we've talked about, and I believe that everybody in the environmental movement and especially people who are so very close to the Earth such as abo people...are interested in aboriginal skills and going back to the Earth on a one to one basis like a child ("Interview").

Brown also proclaims that people who use primitive skills (such as those taught at his classes) are have a stronger environmental ethic: "That kind of environmentalist is real...I've been like a signpost or a stepping stone along their Sacred Path whatever it might be in life. And their environmental motives are a lot stronger, a lot deeper" (Ibid).

Whether Brown realizes the implications of romanticizing Native American lifestyles or not, he has nevertheless created a powerful narrative that draws thousands of students to his classes. He has simply chosen an indigenous role model for his school and run with it, possibly in order to use that model lifestyle to instill environmental ethics. Those ethics may be solely the viewpoint of Brown, but they have caught the attention of a large audience. As Brown says of his teaching experience, "...if we can be pure ourselves, we can touch their hearts and then the Earth will change" (Ibid). This translated Native American experience serves as a powerful tool to paint a picture of reverence for the earth.

### *Apocalyptic themes in wilderness survival*

In Brown's book *The Quest*, Grandfather and a young Tom are discussing spirituality and the idea of collective consciousness. Their talk turns to Stalking Wolf's idea that a spiritual man must have a quest that can affect change and avert environmental catastrophe. Brown also explains one of the Tracker School core philosophies through Grandfather's words:

"The Earth is dying. The destruction of man is close, so very close, and we must all work to change that path of destruction. We must pay for the sins of our grandfathers and grandmothers, for we have long been a society that kills its grandchildren to feed its children...It is very easy to live a spiritual life away from man, but the truth of Vision in spiritual life can only be tested and become a reality when lived near society." (Brown, "The Quest," 131).

Brown explained multiple times in the May Standard class that he could have chosen a life of solitude in the woods, but he would not be fulfilling his vision if he hid from society instead of sharing his message.

Grandfather's vision in *The Quest* is that mankind would be given two signs that the end of the world is near, and two signs so that the "children of the Earth" will be given time to escape into the wilderness (Ibid, 120). Only the children of the Earth will be able to understand that these prophecies have come to pass, so one must be a versed spiritual naturalist in order to get the signal. The prophecies are presented as possible futures that can be stopped if people heed the warnings and return to the earth.

The first vision was of famine, which was to be especially hard on indigenous tribes touched by the agricultural revolution and industrialization—they had lost the ability to “live with the earth.” Grandfather also predicted a disease from monkeys that sounds a lot like HIV (*Ibid*, 125). The second sign was that holes appeared in the sky, and the world around Grandfather was covered in garbage and rotting bodies. After this second sign came to pass, reported Brown, only a spiritual healing would save the earth. The third sign is that the sky turns a vile red and that “It is then that the children of the Earth must run away to the wild places and hide. For when the sky bleeds red, there will be no safety in the world of man.” The fourth sign lasts for ten years, a period of time in which the Earth heals and much of mankind dies. Children of the Earth are admonished to stay hidden away from civilized men—they will die of a great famine. The warrior who is to have given Grandfather these signs gives him this hope and lesson:

“From this time, when the stars bleed, to the fourth and final sign, will be four seasons of peace [that is, one year]. It is in these four seasons that the children of the Earth must live deep in the wild places and find a new home, close to the Earth and the Creator. It is only the children of the Earth that will survive, and they must live the philosophy of the Earth, never returning to the thinking of man. And survival will not be enough, for the children of the Earth must also live close to the Spirit. So tell them not to hesitate if and when this third sign becomes manifest in the stars, for there are but four seasons to escape (*Ibid*, 127).”

Of course these images can be related to real life environmental catastrophes. *The Quest* was copyrighted in 1991, and one event in Grandfather’s prophecies has been

compared to holes in the ozone layer. The ozone hole in Antarctica was discovered in 1985. The HIV reference is obvious and Brown also mentions famine, which is not far-fetched.

Survivalists of all types have their own scenarios and practices in which preparedness for the apocalypse is a key focus in their lives and hobbies. In Richard Mitchell, Jr.'s work *Dancing at Armageddon* he chronicles the lives of survivalists, people for whom, "the slide towards chaos has begun" (Mitchell, 2). Mitchell frames the quest for survival skills and material goods as a way for modernized humans to retain a sense of independence from modernization and, in some of the situations he describes, rationality (Ibid, 6). The survivalists that he describes are small, independent militias, underground organizations of people with storerooms full of firearms and evacuation plans during the inevitable political and social upheaval the U.S. will face.

While Tracker School students are not running through tactical maneuvers in war games, parallels can be drawn. Mitchell claims that one principal interest of survivalists is storytelling, in essence creating a historical narrative that culminates in the destruction of that narrative by war, invasion, or natural disaster, in time for the survivalist to insert his or her own view of the culture of the prepared that will spring up in the aftermath (Ibid, 23). There is a small community of private, well-armed individuals with an escape plan. While Mitchell's survivalists are armed with guns, Trackers are armed with knowledge and handcrafting ability. They exemplify "the achievement of a hypothetical balance between imagined hazards and hardships ahead and the resource, skill, and knowledge at hand or within reach" (Ibid, 37).

The people who will survive Brown's apocalypse are a Native American version

of the militia members—the Apache scouts. Grandfather claims that children of the Earth “must remain hidden, like the ancient scouts, and fight the urge to go back to the destruction of man” (Brown, “The Quest,” 135). In order to do this they must also understand the spiritual aspects of their existences, which presumably deal with reverence for the natural world that will be the earth children’s only home. In the absence of guns they will have naturalist knowledge and spiritual purity for protection.

Trackers also mimic Mitchells’ observation that survivalists may seek autonomy from what they feel is an intrusive, overbearing government. What better way to preserve autonomy than to become the master of your own manufacturing processes? To know, from live animal to finished product, the origins of your buckskin shoes? Your bow drill or earth shelter? It is a beautiful, impractical story to tell oneself—that self-sufficiency in the wilderness is a matter of practice, that people can overcome the oppressive forces in life and government, abandon the trappings of civilization, and establish independent social mores. Tools are waiting to be liberated from within easily found objects that are usually free—the government has not found a way to tax the entirety of nature yet.

Mitchell addresses the implausibility of the survivalist fantasy scenario: the fact that the fantasy requires that survivalists be able to deal with the challenges they face in the event of Armageddon: “In warrior scenarios, full-scale nuclear war hardly ever happens...life remains possible but the complex social organization does not...the remainder of the cataclysmic effects are divided into problems of manageable proportion and negligible covariance” (Mitchell, 88). Similarly, the children of the Earth, despite the pestilence and pollution choking rivers and lakes, should be able to weather the storm by eating wild edibles and using grass and sand filters for water. In these scenarios the

survivors will be able to deal with catastrophe due to knowledge and skills they have acquired through special physical and ideological training and cultural reinforcement at the Tracker School.

It is never possible to predict the end of the world (although Brown says that Grandfather's predictions, always correct, do just that), but it is possible to spend your life in a perpetual state of preparation. Classes on survival skills can give one the sense of security that, were the world or the economy or the government to collapse just right, one might have the very skill set needed to survive the chaos.

Take for example the story of Cardon, a Standard class volunteer who originally came to the school due to a realization of the level of mechanization in his everyday life:

I thought to myself, what would happen if all the lights went out?...I realized basically how civilization completely has made me unprepared for doing anything without the grid, like many people. When I realized that I got all my food out of the supermarket and I didn't know how to do a damn thing I got almost desperate to find something to fill that fear void...I was lucky enough to find people that knew about this place [Tracker School] (Richards).

It is obvious that some people attend for motivations besides communing with nature or learning about a global heritage. There is the fear of being caught unprepared and the idea that survival skills might prove efficacious regardless of the amount of technology that surrounds us.

In the May 2008 Standard class students were required to stay up late for lectures and rise early, creating by the middle of the week a feeling of unreality. In addition, we

were fed sugar-free foods (although a camp store with candy was available for the desperate) with the intention, according to one class volunteer, of ridding our bodies of the toxins that accumulated from eating fast foods and living a slothful city life. Brown stated that every part of his class was intentional and that our bedtimes, break times, and meals were all part of a routine meant to change our perceptions of reality so that we would be more aware of our surroundings and receptive to his lessons.

His explanations of Grandfather's prophecies came late in the week, as though perhaps we had to reach some state of either exhaustion or enlightenment in order to become receptive to such a radical concept as the thought that the loud, sun-burned, coffee-swilling man on the podium in front of us could predict the future through the words of Grandfather. The exact prophecies are available in a six-volume set called "Conversations With Grandfather." Each MP3 and CD of the six is \$18-\$23 apiece. The cover of each volume has a sepia-toned photograph with the earnest eyes of a Native American staring out of a dark brown background.

The idea of apocalypse, especially environmental apocalypse, can be very appealing to the Tracker student. Brown deliberately advertises his environmental ethic in his books and website content. He may oftentimes be "preaching to the choir" with some of his students. His cautionary tale of apocalypse serves multiple purposes. On the surface it gets across an environmental message: the environment is fragile and covered with sentient creatures with whom we share common goals. We should treat our home with care. Earth living skills can be a way to boost our awareness of the natural world and get people closer to the environment. Perhaps an environmental ethic will be strengthened or created by the classes and students will go to greater lengths to stop

environmental degradation.

But the message does something on another level—it creates a community. People who pay the money to attend the Tracker School are part of an “elite” social group—people in the know about important future transpirations, whether we believe the message or not. Knowledge of how to avoid an inevitable, painful future full of famine and disease (which sounds like a die-off of any species that fouls its own ecosystem) is available to a select few, who pay hundreds of dollars for the privileged information that is vaguely described in Brown’s books.

Which brings us to the next logical step: a survivor must become a child of the Earth. Brown has the information that will mold us into children of the Earth if we are willing to pay for it and practice. He creates a need for his services through his mythology, in essence selling us the cure for the condition that his information caused. This makes it difficult to decide if apocalyptic thinking makes it easier to create an environmental consciousness, or if it serves the purpose of a scare tactic for economic purposes. Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive.

In this sense Brown’s teaching method pays off. The Standard class is a basic introductory course, in which students are given a small taste of the information that Brown and his instructors have to offer. He seems in retrospect like a tease, offering hints of lessons to come, in the same way a coyote teacher offers small glimpses of information in order to lure students into a state of overpowering curiosity. Although the environmental message is always clear, always visible, the motivations for inundating students with apocalyptic scenarios are less clear.

### *Neo-primitivist movements and the quest for practical spirituality*

In placing the Tracker School into a modern context, it is helpful to look into the philosophy of “deep ecology.” Deep ecology was popularized by Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher whose ecological model dealt with the “[r]ejection of the human-in-environment image in favor of the *relational, total-field image*” (Drengson, 3). Naess believed that deep ecology favored “biospherical egalitarianism” that included the rights of all creatures as well as diversity in race, class, and gender. Local autonomy and the “fight against pollution and resource depletion also figured into the philosophy (Ibid, 5). None of these components taken separately were deep ecology—a deep and abiding egalitarianism was necessary on all fronts. Naess made the distinction between ecology taught in schools and deep ecology in this way: “The deep approach aims to achieve a fundamental ecological transformation of our sociocultural systems, collective actions, and lifestyles” (Ibid, xix).

In some ways the Tracker School echoes, those sentiments, at least in the sense of respecting the right of other creatures. Although the price of the Tracker School excludes some people of lower socio-economic status, sexism was not apparent at the school and the schools has had numerous female head instructors. Students were asked to respect the natural world, especially when harvesting living creatures for food or shelter. The overall philosophy of cooperation with nature and a feeling of belonging to, rather than utilizing or standing outside of the natural world, permeated the school. And the admonitions that students teach their friends and families these skills is evidence that Tracker teachers are part of an underground movement to revolutionize the way we think about and treat the environment.

Take for example the idea that a new philosophy of self is required by deep ecology, which requires “a total intermingling of person with planet (Merchant, 92). Or the sense the humans have the ability to look back in time for examples on how to live—hunter-gatherers may have had the right idea after all. “People can live their lives as ‘future primitive’ withdrawing from developed land and allowing it to reestablish itself as wilderness” (Ibid, 93). Although deep ecology may not offer a practical guideline on how to restore human civilization to its wilder roots, it does outline a more “primitive” state of being in which humans, instead of railing against the inconveniences of the natural world and paving over wilderness for comfort’s sake, accept wilderness as home.

Brown’s philosophy falls squarely into that idea of wilderness as home, as he has boasted spending years outside with nothing more than the clothes on his back, and sometimes less. The description for his course “Survival Philosophy” reads that, “The wilderness is a temple, a place of worship, and a place of teaching...Enter these temples through the doorway of survival and learn, through many new skills, techniques and workshops that Tom is unable to teach in any other survival oriented class, how to come back to the Earth as a child once more.”

But the temple is at times polluted by an inescapable dependency on technology—students are shuttled in vans, instructors carry cell phones, the crickets and fish for the cooking class and the firewood are all delivered by truck. In one lecture instructor Matt Corradino explained that a hole for a shelter was dug out by a backhoe and, sensing the incredulity of the audience that machinery was used at the school, shot back with, “Have you ever tried to dig a huge hole with just a stick? Don’t think that Native Americans wouldn’t have used a backhoe given the opportunity” (Corradino) This

is where the idea of future-primitive comes in—that a marriage of wilderness skills, an environmental ethic and spirituality, and moderate use of technology could turn us into modern native Americans. The use of a lower-case n is intentional—students can never buy another cultural heritage, but may gain enough knowledge to act less like an invasive species. Tracker students that buy into the environmental philosophy are embracing a quest that will lead inevitably to a shift in consciousness and resource use. In the end, a tree may actually be a tree to the student instead of an abstract, malleable resource.

Brown's school intersects with another fringe groups of the environmental movement (the term “movement” is used quite loosely here to describe groups that are lumped together due to an expressed concern for the natural world, although that expression manifests itself in many ways.). One example is the movement known as “rewilding.” Rewilding is a fairly new concept based on old precepts:

For most green/anti-civilization/primitivist anarchists, rewilding and reconnecting with the earth is a life project. It is not limited to intellectual comprehension or the practice of primitive skills, but instead, it is a deep understanding of the pervasive ways in which we are domesticated, fractured, and dislocated from our selves, each other, and the world, and the enormous and daily undertaking to be whole again. Rewilding has a physical component which involves reclaiming skills and developing methods for a sustainable co-existence, including how to feed, shelter, and heal ourselves with the plants, animals, and materials occurring naturally in our bioregion. It also includes the dismantling of the physical manifestations, apparatus, and infrastructure of civilization (“Rewild

Info”).

It is not a stable movement with handbooks for the apocalypse or a bullet point list of proper rewilding etiquette. It is obvious from the description that there is no set definition of rewilding looks like (though it's easy to imagine some components of modern civilization that definitely don't fit within the movement). “It may look like a group of people collecting wild edibles. It may look like someone turning off their TV for an hour a day” (Ibid). Perhaps that is what is so striking—this is a movement without a center that assumes that all of its members will have something to offer the greater community. This is a concept that affirms that if one has a problem with current social mores of modern civilization there is another way of living. Looking at the message board of [www.rewild.info](http://www.rewild.info), there is a sense that the rewilding community operates as part support group and part planning group—that one needs affirmations that one is not alone in a sea of technology and that there are willing participants in the rewilding social experiment. “thunder thighs” ( a pseudonym) writes on the message board,

i've been feeling a kind of ripeness in the forum for some sort of change,  
specifically in terms of making a transition in making things like rewild  
havens and locally based communities a reality. since i started lurking  
around about a year ago the forum's been something like a womb,  
organizing and giving my thoughts and feelings a purpose, and now it's  
like the dreaming is ready to come out into the waking world. we know  
what it is we want, now lets breath life into it.

(Ibid).

Rewilding sites on the Internet inform us that the idea is not the antithesis of

modern technology, as technology is used to promote it. Like deep ecology, rewilding is offered as an antidote to mechanized civilization. It feeds into a certain longing for a less mechanized time of life, whether real or romanticized, and illustrates that there are people willing to take a step back in time and reclaim what they perceive as a lost heritage.

Brown's school promotes the goals of rewilding and deep ecology by offering an alternative relationship with nature as well as the survival skills that come in handy when living off the grid.

There is a certain sensuality that one encounters when attempting to make the deeper connection encouraged by the Tracker School—the idea that one must use and trust the human senses in order to maintain that connection. To gently touch the prickly spines of the devil's club. To hear birdsong call out the warning of your presence. To smell the aptly named skunk cabbage. And to make the decision that using your senses means validating your experience.

Take as an example the “fox walk.” This is a walk taught at the Tracker School that is purported to help us move “the ebb and flow of the natural world” (Author’s journal). Our modern walk, hindered by “oppressive footwear” and a quick gait “sends shock waves through nature,” alerting animals to our presence and characterizing our disconnected state from nature. A tracker (modeled in this instance on Brown’s idea of an Apache scout) would walk slowly, feeling the earth beneath her feet, head upright, eyes trained to include the peripheral vision. She would take in the environment with all senses, mind as crystal clear and blank as a Buddhist monk’s. This is a core message at Tracker School: one must slow down, and put the mind in a ritualistic state—the speed of the ecosystem itself—in order reconnect our senses and the natural world.

The fox walk, practiced regularly, is supposed as an antidote to the mortal hurry that accompanies the urban dweller from task to task. It is a walking meditation. It also fosters interaction with nature, as focusing on one's entire field of vision leaves little room on intense concentration on the centerpiece of modern human understanding: the human experience.

And maybe that expansion of human/nature interaction fosters an environmental ethic, plants the seed within which the interaction can grow into a relationship with the non-human world. As David Abrams writes in *The Spell of the Sensuous* of the modern human condition, “Caught up in a mass of abstractions, hypnotized by a host of human-made technologies that only reflect us back to ourselves, it is all too easy to forget our carnal inheritance in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities” (Abram, 22). We have been continually shaped and molded by our interactions with the natural world, a relationship that continues despite our concrete-colored ignorance of the situation. “To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn those other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence” (Ibid). If one slows down and greets and relates to non-human neighbors, how much more difficult would it be to pave over their habitats or bait them with poison? How could a reverence to the life-sustaining properties of the natural world encourage its continued proliferation? The Tracker School and other programs like it promote that animistic reverence as the logical conclusion of being alive on earth. These programs might clear up “a real inability to clearly see, or focus upon, anything outside the realm of human technology, or to hear as meaningful anything other than human speech” (Ibid, 27).

## **Conclusion**

In relation to these movements, and to emerging structural issues such as looming climate change and economic circumstances that affect the relevance of basic environmental literacy for many Americans, I am pursuing this research further. I will attend the Tracker School a second time in May 2009, deepening connections with key informants, and possibly building toward a more formal research process that will unfold during my graduate study.

My experience at the Tracker School and subsequent research proved to be simultaneously enlightening and confusing. There are still many questions I was unable to properly answer within the time frame afforded. Now that I have a better grasp of the history of wilderness schools and the mechanisms by which one of them functions, I would like to take the research to a more practical level.

As mentioned above, American attitudes towards wilderness (which can go by other names: natural resources, public land, national parks, historical sites, etc.) have serious real-world consequences. Land that is a resource can be “resourced” to death, at the expense of the lives of many plant and animal species, as well as human health. A disconnection from nature has proven to be disastrous for the human species, ensconced as the inhabitants of industrialized nations are in urban areas, glued to computer screens, unable to see the forest for the buildings. I do not need to reiterate that modern humans live in a time of fundamental disconnect from the natural world that entirely encompasses and sustains them.

Some survival schools claim to offer a pathway out of that disconnected paradigm, but little is known about the practical applications of survival classes. Can

wilderness schools facilitate behavioral changes in their students? What processes might facilitate those changes and how do they manifest? If changes occur are they permanent? Upon my return to the Tracker School I will have access to people who have taken multiple classes and I hope to distribute a survey and perform interviews that might clear up these questions. Did people move, switch careers, or become more politically active due to wilderness classes? These questions need answering.

At the Tracker School students are admonished to share the skills they learn with others. Despite the fact that the school makes money off of attendees, instructors encourage the dissemination of school material. This may be partially because wilderness survival information is readily available in literature and on the Internet, and Tracker school graduates will most likely not take away from the school by teaching skills to their friends. However, I have noticed that many former Tracker instructors and students have formed formal or informal schools and survival lessons that appear to be based off the Tracker School philosophy. It would be interesting to track the formation of wilderness schools with that reverential message. Do nature-worship schools all have their roots in Tracker School philosophy? Are they using the same lessons and rhetoric? How accessible/affordable are they to people in the area? Are the schools economically viable and do they represent a shift in environmental education? There are a multitude of unanswered questions about wilderness schools, and this style of school in particular deals with attitudes towards nature. If these schools represent a favored method (or one of few methods) of disseminating positive views of and interaction with nature, they deserve further exploration. These schools might be a deserving model for mainstream education inasmuch as they are able to captivate an audience with an environmental message.

The inability of low-income individuals to access this information in the wilderness school setting is troubling. Environmental psychology has advanced the idea that interactions with and within nature could be necessary for normal mental functioning. Assuming that this is correct, minority and low-income groups, which have been shown to be least likely to recreate outdoors, are missing valuable opportunities to restore mental functions. The lack of wilderness in urban areas and the cost of transportation to wilderness areas preclude them from many outdoor experiences. This includes wilderness survival schools, for obvious reasons of cost. It would be worthwhile to test the feasibility of wilderness programs for low-income and minority students. An addition to schools in “pure” wilderness areas like the Pine Barrens would be schools in urban areas. Although city wildlife is different from wildlife in rural and wilderness areas, it still exists, as does the possibility of teaching many other survival skills in urban areas. I am not suggesting a study of the feasibility of urban survival schools, but rather the practical application of a survival school model in an urban setting. Considering that attitudes towards the natural world, among many other factors, are contributing to the looming environmental crises, it is far past the time of studying a model of connecting people to nature. It is the time to do so in whatever manner is possible with the tools we have available.

I do not wish to suggest that wilderness survival schools are the salvation of humans and the natural world or that they are the only way to heal the enormous gap between nature and us. But my own experiences and reflections upon the survival school experience has informed me that there is an intrinsic value in the lessons that I and other students have learned. Transformation is a painful process, and the transformation that I

have experienced due to my attempts to “return” to nature has been no less painful than any other. It is difficult to simultaneously commune with nature and watch its blind destruction. It is difficult to think of the natural world as an “it” anymore or to navigate conversations with those who do think of nature as a large warehouse full of goods meant for human consumption. So while wilderness schools are not the entire remedy for what ails industrialized nations, that takes away none of their power to cause a transformation in human attitudes towards the natural world.

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