

Forever Wild: Ian Player's Lessons on Wilderness and Fulfillment

By Carlyle Howard

“Millennial” is not the right word for my generation. Just as the original Lost Generation of the 1940’s was the test generation for mechanized warfare, we are the test generation for the type of soulless, mechanized, human interaction brought about by the Internet. We are profoundly confused. We look at our parents’ lives, and we don’t quite want that for ourselves. We’ve been pushed through the traditional school system and have arrived ready for the job market, yet we want more, something else. We’ve been told this is how life is supposed to be, but we struggle to believe it. We’re a remarkably curious generation; seventy-seven percent of us travel just for pleasure. We prefer an “authentic experience” when we travel, meaning when we explore we’re looking for something more genuine. We clearly want to explore, but we only have one foot out the door. We’re limited by the confines of the past, of the way we were raised, and of what we think is supposedly ‘normal.’

A Kaiser Family Foundation study found that young people devote more than seven hours a day to electronic media. Fifty hours a week in front of a screen. Seventy-one percent of us say we would be “very uncomfortable” on a one week vacation without online connectivity. We live in a distorted reality. We’re plagued by the vices handed to us by those tasked with teaching us how the world works. We’re increasingly incapable of drawing the line that separates the virtual world and the real one. We’re confused, exalting what’s trivial and destroying what’s most precious to our own kind. We seem to have an idea of what’s right, but we keep tripping over ourselves and each other in the search for a guiding light.

In 2017, National Geographic dedicated a front-page story to the desperate situation of America’s national parks - directly correlated to the millennial generation’s lack of interest in nature. The article searched for an answer. Why aren’t young people going to the parks? The director of the National Parks Service said young people are more removed from nature than any of the previous generations. He had an epiphany while working with inner-city kids. He pointed to a framed picture of the Grand Canyon hanging in his office. From their perspective, he says, it “looked scary to them. Empty. Forbidding. Not welcoming. They said, ‘where are all the people?’” The author of the article understood when he took a group of students from Los Angeles to Death Valley. He said they wouldn’t leave the van. The silence and the darkness threatened them. They don’t have a relationship with nature, and they don’t see the value of nature in relation to themselves. They won’t feel a sense of loss as it slowly deteriorates. Of America’s wilderness, Teddy Roosevelt once wrote, “it was here that the romance of my life began.” We won’t protect what we don’t love, and many of us weren’t raised to love nature. We weren’t raised to feel spiritually connected to our surroundings, not to nature nor to other people.

The manifestations of this loss of connection in society are endless. We’ve returned to a fight for basic human rights. We let fear consume us in the form of hate and rejection of

those we perceive to be different from us. Researchers have found that Children of Generation Z are suffering from “nature-deficit disorder.” They’re experiencing attention difficulties, obesity, and higher rates of emotional and physical illnesses. Children that spend more time in nature were found to be healthier, less aggressive, and more adaptable. Certain aspects of our humanity are dependent on a relationship with nature.

Over fifty years ago, a man named Ian Player had already perceived the importance of this human-nature connection because he had experienced it. He fought in World War II, and when he returned to his home country of South Africa he wandered from job to job. In his words, he was a “lost soul” (xvii). He searched for meaning in a world that seemed to reject it. He began in the gold mines, working a mile underground. His father had done so, as had his father’s father. It seemed a natural path for him to follow. After a while, he inwardly “rebelled at not being able to see the sun.” So, he left. He tried other jobs, like working on the docks in Durban, being an accountant’s clerk, and fishing with a rod and a reel. He worked in factories. Frustrated with his work and his aimlessness, he decided to keep a promise he made to himself in the winter of 1944. He would canoe 120 kilometers down the Msunduzi and Mgeni Rivers from Pietermaritzburg to Durban. Thus, the story begins.

As he puts it, this canoe journey Africa “awakened my soul.” It also caused him to return late to work, and he was fired. He said, “fate had other paths for him to follow” (xviii). Publicity from the canoe trip caught the attention of a senior conservation officer in the provincial wildlife service, who offered him a lowly, entry-level post in rural Zululand. Of what would happen there, he writes, “from being a lost soul I would be ensouled” (xviii).

In his book, *Zululand Wilderness: Shadow and Soul*, he tells vividly and in careful detail the tale of his first contact with the earth of the iMfolozi, a wilderness game reserve in South Africa’s (then) Natal Province. One can tell simply from the way in which he describes the event how he yearns for the reader to feel these moments. He tells of when he and Ranger Hendrik Van Schoor are caught in a storm on the journey back to Hendrik’s home on the reserve. They trek through the “deep brooding atmosphere of the hills, rivers, and valleys.” They “could smell the strong scent of wood smoke with the smell of fresh rain, an exhilarating contact with the earth and air of Africa.” In awe of the power of the storm and of his place in it, they trek all day. Wondering in those moments whether the early men of the land “were not, like me, caught up for moments in the sheer music, the symphony of land, sky, water, and other life.” Beyond awe and adrenaline, something about this singular encounter with this land changed him. He felt a profound connectedness, a oneness of the soul of the land with his own. At the mercy of the storm, he felt both insignificant and infinite. A man’s ego has no control in these moments. If we seek understanding, we must first allow ourselves to be humbled.

Ian suffered his whole life from a physical handicap, the result of an accident in his youth. He rarely spoke of it and always used it as a spur to challenge himself. He spent his life protecting land that few people gave a damn about, during a time of civil unrest when both white farmers and poor, black villagers fought with the game rangers to use

the land for their cattle and crops, and also poached the protected wildlife. This convinced Ian that the real challenge in nature conservation is people. If we can't change how people feel and think about nature, no amount of saving wildlife is going to work. If nature saved his life by helping him know himself, he knew it could save others.

With his working companion and mentor, the traditional Zulu chief Magqubu Ntombela, he led the team that saved the white rhino from extinction. It was a historic accomplishment, but that's not what he should be remembered by. He used his tremendous reputation as a tough game ranger that saved an entire species to give him the credibility to talk about what he thought was the most important issue: that human beings must understand themselves as a part of nature.

Being the type of person he was, he didn't just talk about it. He created the Wilderness Leadership School, an experiential school that led groups of students, community and business leaders of different races on treks through the African bush, helping to pioneer multi-racial environmental education when this defied the national law of apartheid, or separation of races. He founded the World Wilderness Congress, which evolved into (and remains) an accomplished, action-oriented, global collaboration of politicians, conservationists, rangers, scientists, businessmen, community leaders, and artists. He established the WILD Foundation that became a global conservation organization based in the United States. He was a visionary; he was a romantic.

Even into his old age, Ian's eyes were described as "to burn like coals." Is that not what we all long for? Don't we all want a passion that ignites a fire inside, up until the day we die? When I met Ian, a few years before he passed, I didn't know anything about him. I had come with a group of friends and colleagues to update him on WILD's recent accomplishments, though I could sense our presence there also brought him an air of hope. He didn't seem to anymore recognize the world in which we live. His growing physical challenges weighed on him, and his weary demeanor could be construed as a sense of hopelessness.

I waited until we said our goodbyes to express what I wanted to tell him. So, as Ian took my hand, I looked into his smoldering eyes and said that as long as there are good people in the world they will fight for what's right. I told him that I am young, but I am also strong, and there will always be others like me. Just then, I could have sworn I saw a glimmer in his eye as he smiled and held my hand just a moment longer.

That was the only time I met Ian; he passed a few years later. Yes, my generation is lost, and technology exploits our weaknesses and fear. However Ian, too, was once lost. He wrote that there were certain moments in his life when he felt there was a missing element, and it was from these moments that something new always broke through. Perhaps our world now isn't as different as he thought it to be.

Ian's life's work was to create connections between humans through nature, inspiring them to protect the land and each other. He was a pioneer. Most of us can't make it to Africa. However, Teddy Roosevelt once said after camping in Yosemite that "it was like

lying in a great solemn cathedral, far vaster and more beautiful than any built by the hand of man.” Nature provides us sanctuary and most importantly, its sanctuaries are open to all of us.

Sources:

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