

By Gary Gripp, September, 2016

Confronting some of the Challenges of Intellectual Integrity

Most people like nice clean narratives that support favored points of view. I know I do. I particularly like the narrative which suggests that pre-agricultural humans lived in harmony with Nature, that life was good for the egalitarian immediate-return mobile hunter-gatherers who were our wild ancestors, and that these people tended to be more fully developed human beings than most of us today. Holding this viewpoint makes me a primitivist--which, I suppose, qualifies as an ideology. But this ideology is not merely nostalgic in the sense of pining for better, simpler times. It is also forward-looking, believing that this long-proven way of life is the only hope for a human future on this human-ravaged planet. But every once in a while I have to ask myself if this is a faith-based ideology, or am I actually willing to look at conflicting evidence without putting my thumb on the scale? Just how clean and pure does my narrative have to be? Is there room for ambiguity, uncertainty, and even contradiction, in the favored narratives I cling to? How disconcerting is it to my worldview to admit to smaller or larger areas of murky unknowing?

I bring this up having just read John Feeney's longish article titled "Land Management among Hunter-Gatherers: Questioning the Ubiquity Claims." A salient value of this piece, it seems to me, is in its embrace of conflicting testimonies and its willingness to hold final judgment in abeyance. This is supposedly an overriding value informing all scholarship and science, but of course everyone has their pet theories and beliefs, unexamined assumptions, as well as unacknowledged pressures and incentives, all weighting the scale toward slanted, and often predetermined, conclusions. In many cases, a writer will select 'evidence' that supports the view they already hold and wish to promote, and ignore any evidence to the contrary. There are any number of such books and articles out there in the marketplace of ideas: some, like Ian Morris' *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels*, are blatantly ideological, as well as demonstrably contrary to well-established fact. Morris, like Charles Mann and other partisans of civilization, is clearly anti-primitivist in outlook, and this bias shows on every page. As a primitivist, I am naturally attuned to articles of doctrine in opposition to my own more-or-less settled views, and I will point a scornful finger at ideologues posing as scientists and scholars. But what if misinformation is passed along by people of one's own general persuasion? Do bonds of ideological kinship incline us to overlook wee stretches of known fact, or projections based on shaky assumptions?

The central focus of "Land Management among Hunter-Gatherers: Questioning the Ubiquity Claims," is what researcher John Feeney calls 'Traditional Land Management,' which he identifies as deliberate manipulation of the land for human ends. This would include any form of horticulture as well as purposeful alteration of landscape by means of fire. How our wild pre-agricultural ancestors behaved toward the land—including when and why—is of more than academic importance. As Dr. Feeney states the case: "Arguing TLM [Traditional Land Management] has been beneficial for

ecosystems, some authors promote it and maintain TLM is important to a mutually beneficial relationship between humans and the land (e.g., Anderson, 2005; Turner, Ignace & Ignace, 2000). Clearly, if it might be integral to any ecologically benign human lifeway, it should be examined carefully. Yet an inspection of the literature reveals that much about TLM has received little scrutiny. Much of the related literature makes a case for the value of these practices without substantially addressing possible ecological criticisms or concerns regarding the role of TLM in the growth of human domination of Earth's systems. Yet analysis does reveal concerns. Some emerge on investigating common, broad claims made by proponents arguing the case for TLM." (p. 7)

Both Turner and Anderson (referenced above) represent a change in orientation and tone in the literature of paleoanthropology and archeology that began to appear in the last decade of the twentieth century. I would characterize this as a move away from the cultural chauvinism and condescension that characterized such practitioners (going back to the days of "the white man's burden")—and toward something very like respect and admiration for the humans beings under scrutiny. With the publication of *Sacred Ecology*, by Fikret Berkes in 1999, a new cross-disciplinary orientation to the study of pre-agricultural humans was announcing itself, as the notion of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) appeared on the scene and began to attain a certain limited academic respectability. I read this book when it came out in its second edition in 2008, and was excited to find it filled with examples of Native peoples living their lives ecologically, and doing so quite deliberately. Later that year I read M. Kat Anderson's *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources*, and found it to be in a similar tradition as *Sacred Ecology*. It was obvious to me that both authors were sympathetic to Native peoples—both living and long gone--granting them not only a full complement of intelligence but also a sense of kinship with the living world, accompanied by a feeling for its ecologically based moral order. Because these authors, unlike so many others, were able to grant our wild ancestors their full humanity, I was not as critical of some of their statements as it now appears I should have been.

The following words from *Tending the Wild* may serve to illustrate how easy it is to be taken in by questionable presumptions when set alongside obvious good sense: "An indigenous person in aboriginal California...had a direct personal relationship with every morsel that filled his or her belly. He or she knew where it came from, what was required to gather, process, and store it, and how the plant or animal that provided it had to be treated and tended to insure a continuing supply. Each person was dependent on nature, both vulnerable to its vagaries and benefiting from its remarkable abundance. Food was inherent in the environment and present everywhere in the landscape, thanks to natural processes, the human ingenuity behind management practices, and social cooperation." (p. 290)

According to John Feeney, the term, 'management practices,' as used here, is questionable, because it is such a blanket category capable of hiding many important distinctions. Is using fire to purge a deer- and elk meadow of encroaching Douglas fir, or burning hazel for superior basketry materials, really to be put in the same category as felling a forest and transforming it into agricultural land? In addition to this over-broad category error--or rather, beneath it, in the subterranean depths--is the highly questionable supposition that human management actually improves upon the natural, wild ecosystem. "Gathering edible plants carefully and respectfully was, and continues to be, viewed by

indigenous people as both good for the gatherer and good for the plants. When humans collect and eat native foods, they become part of the localized food web, full participants in the places where they live.” (290) This statement may seem innocent enough, even as it implies that human management, when “carefully and respectfully” practiced, is not only benign but ecologically beneficial—maybe even vital to ecosystem health.

This is a very seductive notion, presuming as it does that humans are not necessarily an ecologically harmful invasive species, but are capable of making a positive contribution to the ecological order. I’d like to believe this myself, not least of all because it makes evolutionary sense that humans evolved as part of the Community of Life, that we had a place here, an ecological purpose that served the Whole. Maybe we have lost our way over the last few millennia, but our kind has not always been the scourge of the Earth. That is to say, our failure to live in loyalty to the Whole and by the ecologically based Law of Reciprocity is not genetically or biologically grounded but is instead the product of culture—and most pointedly, our particular culture.

This is an important distinction, because if the human practices that are destroying the living world are genetically determined, then there is little or no hope for anything but more of the same. If the culprit is culture, not biology, then there is at least some faint hope that humans could learn to live in ways more supportive of a diverse and thriving biosphere.

In this article, Feeney is not making precisely this point, but a related one. If I understand him correctly, he believes that the great divide in our history did not arrive all at once with the advent of agriculture, as is commonly believed. Instead, our slide down the slippery slope into the world-destroying species we have become began when we started storing food. The anthropologist James Woodburn has called attention to the distinction between hunter-gatherers who ‘consume most of their food on the day they obtain it,’ and those who store food for later use. The people who live a day at a time he calls Immediate-Return (IR), and those who save up for the future he calls Delayed-Return (DR). As might be expected, this change in lifeway among hunter-gatherers was inevitably accompanied by a change in worldview. This is a distinction that Feeney insists upon, and I believe he is onto something important here.

When humans ‘lived in the hands of the gods,’ to use Daniel Quinn’s elegant phrase, we were in a particular relationship with Mother Nature and Mother Earth. It was a wholly dependent relationship, and sometimes our Mother could be fickle in what she gave to us and what she withheld. As dependent beings, we were naturally solicitous to stay on our Mother’s good side. The bond between the human and everything around us that contributed to our well-being was a connection and relationship to be nurtured on a daily basis, not only through ritual and ceremony, but also in how we treated our brothers and sisters, and all our relations in the Community of Life, as well as Mother Earth herself. As immediate-return hunter-gatherers our common attitude was one of reverence, respect, awe, and love for this world that gave us life, as well as all the small and large satisfactions that come with being alive in a world so rich in diversity and abundance. Life was sacred, as was the Earth that made life possible. Humility and gratitude came to us naturally, as did the sense that the world was sacred—and perfect just as it was. In this relationship with the natural world, and in this frame of mind, making the self-willed Earth over into something else, or even taking for human use

more than the system could afford, was unthinkable. There was a bond of trust between us and the living (spirit-inhabited) world, a bond that even among some indigenous hunter-gatherers living today depends upon never doubting that the people will be provided for by their sacred Mother. Storing food, hoarding, would be a violation of this sacred bond, and of the absolute trust at its heart.

When we began storing food our attitudes changed. We looked to ourselves instead of to our sacred Mother to take care of our daily needs. In this process, and over time, the Earth and its creatures became desacralized, while we grew ever fuller of ourselves. We began to see ourselves as demigods who could do whatever we chose in a world with no rules, except those we invented for ourselves. What Feeney is calling Traditional Land Management practices are clearly a reflection of this new state of mind. Making the world over according to our own whims and desires may have started modestly enough, as with reburying parts of corms and bulbs, or selecting for grass over trees with controlled burns, but as we can see in retrospect 'land management' has proved to be a slippery and treacherous slope indeed.

What I believe Dr. Feeney wants us to see is that human behavior has not been one continuous, unbroken experiment in environmental manipulation, as some suggest. There is indeed a point of discontinuity in our human past, when one way of life gave way to another, and this point of divergence had far-reaching ramifications. Many now identify this "wrong turn" with the rise of agriculture. And agriculture **was** a dramatic break from the hunter-gatherer lifeway of our wild ancestors--but this change did not appear out of nowhere. This overwhelming transformation in human lifeway was anticipated and prepared for by an earlier, more subtle change in the human relationship to the world around us, and it started with the storage of food--filling us with a newly-felt sense of control and power we had never experienced before. And power, as we know, has a long, insidious history of corrupting human beings. No matter how illusory or temporary, power always seems to have its way with us, flattering our vanity, eroding our integrity, seducing us into behaviors that harm the Whole.

There are those who would blur the distinction between those who live in the hands of the gods and those who take the mantle of deity onto themselves--and in so doing suggest, with little or no evidence, that humans have always been land managers. Here is Colin Tudge, for instance, in *Neanderthals, Bandits and Farmers: How Agriculture Really Began*: "The point is not to put a precise date on this transition [to farming] but to note that human beings virtually throughout their two million year history have not merely been 'hunters and gatherers', in the way that these terms are generally understood, but have always manipulated their environment in various ways that increased their food supply." (p. 16)

Charles Mann, in his popular book, 1491, takes this notion to perverse extremes when he allows the reader to believe that all of Amazonia is "human created." The implication to be drawn from both Mann's and Tudge's offhand declarations is that we humans have always been like this, and there is nothing to be done about it. It's in our genes. Land manipulation is part of our genetic heritage; it's at the heart of our very nature.

Not so fast says our questioner of ubiquity. Where's your evidence? Well, the answer is: almost nowhere. What is happening here--alike with advocates for indigenous peoples, such as Turner and Anderson, or advocates for capitalism and industrial civilization, such as Tudge and Mann—is the Flintstonization of the distant past. It is so much easier to project the premises and suppositions of our own culture onto the entire race of man than it is to try to come to an understanding of these ancient peoples in their own terms. It also makes for a highly convenient rationale for everything that civilized people have done in and to the world. But, as Dr. Feeney notes, it is possible to come up with reasonable suppositions about immediate-return hunter-gatherers of the distant past by carefully studying indigenous people who still live in this way, or have until the very recent past.

I would suggest that a failure to do this important foundational research is not necessarily intellectual laziness alone, or the kind of cultivated myopia that comes from a focus at once too broad and too narrow. Very likely it is these two in combination with the human predisposition to want to know what you want to know, and to not know what you don't want to know. I am not saying this tendency is genetically determined, only that it is persistent and very nearly ubiquitous.

If we are looking to the past to guide us into the future, or even just to tell us what is humanly possible, it is a matter of some consequence that we confront the available evidence with a maximum of intellectual honesty as well as intellectual rigor. In this regard, Dr. John Feeney sets a very high standard--one that might serve as a model for us all. Like anyone else, he has his own favored narratives and points of view. But he does not indulge these at the expense of ignoring, or failing to look for, contradictory evidence—though he repeatedly demonstrates where others have indulged in both forms of slipshod scholarship and selective blindness. In doing so, they violate a founding principle of the truth quest, which is to faithfully follow wherever the evidence leads, even if it doesn't tell you what you want it to.

I have already admitted that I like a nice clean narrative that shines with clarity, untarnished by contradictions and ambiguities. I think most of us do. But now I have been reminded, by Feeney's example, that the honest quest for truth is more than an ideal to be conscientiously sought; it is the bedrock of all human knowledge. Human knowledge is, and presumably always will be, partial and provisional, never fully settled, because the Universe and everything in it is ever in process, and because the human capacity for knowing is not unlimited. Partial and provisional though they are, facts, knowledge, and truth have value to the human according to how accurately they mirror what is, what once was, and what might be possible in a human future. Manufactured facts posing as the real thing are not really helpful in the end.

So, here is what I glean from Dr. Feeney's extensive scholarship and his conscientious attempt to play fairly with what are believed to be the facts of our distant past: Immediate Return mobile hunter-gatherers seem to have lived according to a particular set of rules, guidelines, and prevailing attitudes, and these arose from the particulars of their lived relationship with the Earth and its creatures. The nature of this relationship was one of interdependence and reciprocity, in which the Earth was held to be sacred, as was all of Life, as manifested in each individual living being. This perception of their lived reality gave rise to feelings of gratitude for the opportunity to live in such a world, as well as an appreciation for how beautifully its many integrated systems worked together

and worked for all. Recognizing that the human was a small part of a much larger whole, and that the integrity of the whole must be preserved for the good of all, these people employed ritual, prayer, and ceremony, as well as everyday forms of conservation, to help hold their world together. They did not practice any but the most rudimentary forms of what is now being called Traditional Land Management, because how could anyone have the temerity to believe they could improve upon the world just as it was? Such hubris, such arrogance, would surely be punished by the Great Mystery behind this world that knows exactly what it wants to be, and needs no instruction from humans!

I accept this understanding of our immediate-return wild ancestors as reliably factual, not only because this worldview has been echoed again and again by indigenous peoples all over the globe, but because it represents my own sense of the world--an intuition I have felt since early childhood, and one that remains with me still. Acting upon this view of the world is something I call "living in loyalty to the Whole."

No matter how much evidence we can marshal in support of our favored perspectives on the world, at some point we are always required to make a leap of faith. Identifying just where that point is in our own thinking is not an easy matter, either intellectually or emotionally, but we must make the attempt if we truly value intellectual integrity.

In my own case, that leap of faith is based on the proposition that if human beings were able to live in right relationship with the natural world throughout much of our tenure here, we should be able to do it again. I want to believe this, because I want to believe that the human has a rightful place within the Community of Life, and a positive ecological role to play on this profoundly ecological planet. But to be honest with myself, I have to be able to see that this is a belief, and very far from established fact. I reject the reductionist and deterministic thinking of the scientific materialists for many reasons, but not least of all because I do not want to believe that we, as a species, are quite that hopeless. The obvious implication of their worldview is that our nature (and therefore our behavior) is genetically determined, our destiny foreordained.

I don't want to believe this, as it goes against my deepest instincts and values, but in order to stay honest with myself I have to acknowledge the possibility that their view might be more correct than my own. I would be very disappointed to discover that the Universe is just as devoid of meaning and value as their view suggests, but I am not going to accept this nihilism without a lot more solid evidence than I have seen so far. Nor does intellectual integrity require me to accept the unacceptable. But what a genuine commitment to the truth quest **does** require is that I do my best to sort evidence-based beliefs from those I simply find agreeable to my own preferred version of the world.

The problem is not in holding to our preferred beliefs. We humans are meaning-making beings who live by story, and we like our stories to make moral, spiritual, and emotional sense of our lives. This is our nature, and, though we can suppress it, we cannot fully escape it. The problem comes when we fail to distinguish between those of our beliefs that are evidence-based and those we chose to hold because they support our preferred narratives. In fact, it is much more comfortable for most of us to allow an unchecked mingling of our various beliefs, and not put ourselves to the trouble of sorting

through the various shades of belief that define our worldview. This careful piece of criticism by John Feeney invites us to step out of our comfort zone and do the hard work required of those who seek a high degree of intellectual honesty and integrity. For highlighting this challenge he deserves our thanks.