

Your Personal Coach

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In the 1980's, a North Carolina statewide program was initiated to establish a resident Canada goose population. At that time, many of the eleven subspecies of Canada Geese were in danger of extinction from habitat destruction caused by human beings. Now, it seems our efforts to promote the welfare of these gentle and intelligent birds have been too successful (perhaps, the only governmental program ever to achieve too much success). Throughout much of the country, Canada Geese have proliferated at such a rate that they are causing problems.

At wildlife refuges like Pea Island, these hungry birds are eating up precious resources that we would like to reserve for migratory birds. The solution? Trap and gas them. But, Canada Geese aren't just causing problems for their non-residential kinfolk at national refuges. It seems that they have a penchant for grazing suburban golf courses with their broad expanses of tasty grass. ("I swear I missed that shot because he was honking so loud"). Homeowners complain about goose droppings on their tidy lawns. Many state extension offices offer easy-to-follow instructions about how to get rid of these birds which include Kevlar wire fences, scare tactics (like propane exploders and pyrotechnics), and other "humane" approaches such as trapping and shooting. Now there's a sport.

Let me make sure I understand this: Twenty years ago, we invited these birds into our communities and, in fact, helped them survive. But now, we're told, there are simply too many of them, so they gotta go. This view demonstrates a terrible disregard for the integrity of nature and our place in it. Instead of looking into the future for new and even more effective goose control technologies, it might be interesting to, instead, look to the wisdom of the past to find enlightenment about our role in nature.

In 1854, the leader of the Suquamish Indians, Chief Seattle (real name Seathl) who lived on the islands of the Puget Sound, gave a response to President Franklin Pierce's offer to buy the land of his people. There is some controversy about Chief Seattle's words. His speech was written down by Dr. Henry A. Smith – a settler and amateur writer who did not speak the native Salish language of the tribe and then waited almost thirty years to transcribe his notes. Some argue that the original speech was re-edited by a Hollywood writer. But the truth is that Chief Seattle was a spiritual and articulate man and he said something like these words which are as true today as they were when spoken a century and a half ago:

"How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?"

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man.

The white man's dead forget the country of their birth when they go walk among the stars. Our dead never forget this beautiful earth, for it is the mother of the red man. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters; the deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadows,

the body heat of the pony, and man - all belong to the same family.

So, when the Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land, he asks much of us.

This shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you land, you must remember that it is sacred, and you must teach your children that it is sacred and that each ghostly reflection in the clear water of the lakes tells us events and memories in the life of my people. The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father.

The rivers are our brothers, they quench our thirst. The rivers carry our canoes, and feed our children. If we sell you our land, you must remember to teach your children that the rivers are our brothers, and yours, and you must henceforth give the rivers the kindness you would give any brother.

We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. He leaves his fathers' graves behind and he does not care. His fathers' graves and his children's birthright are forgotten. He treats his mother, the earth, and his brother, the sky as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep or bright beads. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only desert.

The air is precious to the red man, for all things share the same breath - the beast, the man, they all share the same breath. The white man does not seem to notice the air he breathes. Like a man dying for many days, he is numb to the stench. But we if sell you our land, you must remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all life it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also receives his last sigh. And if we sell you our land, you must keep it apart and sacred as a place where even the white man can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow's flowers.

We will consider your offer to buy our land. If we decide to accept, I will make one condition: the white man must treat the beasts of this land as his brothers.

What is man without the beasts? If the beasts were gone, men would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts, soon happens to man. All things are connected.

Teach your children what we have taught our children -- that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves.

Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

Even the white man whose God walks and talks with him as friend to friend, cannot be exempt from common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We shall see. One thing we know, which the white man may one day discover, our God is the same God. You may think now that you own Him as you wish to own our land, but you cannot. He is the God of man, and His compassion is equal for the red man and the white. This hearth is precious to Him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator. The whites, too, shall pass; perhaps sooner than all other tribes. Contaminate your bed and you will on night suffocate in your own waste.”(www.chiefseattle.com/history/chiefseattle/chief.htm)

While our resident geese may have become something of an “inconvenient truth,” it seems that they still have something to teach us.

Readers who have participated in teambuilding workshops will recognize a familiar story called “Lessons Learned from Geese.” In light of the terrible decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to trap and euthanize resident Canada Geese at the Pea Island Refuge, I thought these lessons might bear repeating.

When you see geese flying in a "V" formation, you might be interested in knowing what scientists have discovered about why they fly that way.

FACT: As each bird flaps its wings it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in a "V" formation, the whole flock adds at least 71 percent greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own.

TRUTH: People who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going quicker and easier because they are traveling on the trust of one another

FACT: Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front.

TRUTH: There is strength and power and safety in numbers when traveling in the same direction with whom we share a common goal.

FACT: When the lead goose gets tired, he rotates back in the wing and another goose flies point.

TRUTH: It pays to take turns doing hard jobs.

FACT: The geese honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

TRUTH: We all need to be remembered with active support and praise.

FACT: When a goose gets sick or is wounded and falls out, two geese fall out of formation and follow him down to help and protect him. They stay with him until the crisis resolves, and then they launch out on their own or with another formation to catch up with their group.

TRUTH: We must stand by each other in times of need. We also must remember to give each other a big "honk" more often!

I feel certain that if we took to heart these lessons from geese, we could work together as a team to find creative, humane ways to live together – humans and geese – in ways that resonate with the spirit of the web of life. Let’s get to work.

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