Back to the Pleistocene! (To Save the Earth)

by storm

Thirteen feet of rain fall yearly on the coast of western Washington, of which seven inches have hit the ground since yesterday noon. For a week I've been living on berries, mushrooms, foliage, roots and invertebrates within the temperate rainforests and beaches of the Olympic Peninsula. I am hunkered within the burned-out, yet living shell of an ancient western red cedar, trying to start a campfire. Angry rivulets of aqua pura *cascade confusingly over the fire-scarred, exposed sapwood of this millennium--old forest sentinel, rivulets that seem intent on thwarting my efforts at coaxing the fire-spirit from this hand drill set. I've been carrying these firesticks--a long, straight branch from an elderberry shrub (the spindle) and a short length of root (the hearthboard) that I collected from a blown-over western hemlock—underneath my clothing in an effort to dry them out. Strong gusts from the west shower the area with sitka spruce cones. It's getting dark. I need a fire.*

If you've seen the movie *Castaway*, you may remember that Tom Hanks attempted to make fire by two methods. The first involved rotating a slim spindle of wood onto (and into) a wider, flatter piece of wood. As friction increases at the contact point between the two sticks, the woods disintegrate into a fine powder that will spontaneously combust when the combination of downward pressure and speed (applied wholly by your own two hands!) raises the temperature of your efforts to approximately 800-degrees F. The resulting fire-egg (a.k.a. coal, ember) would subsequently hatch into flames when applied to a tinder nest of cattail seed head fluff, moss, slivers of wood and shredded bark. Humans and their kin have been using fire for at least 1.5 million years, but for only one one-hundredth of that period of time have we been able to actually create fire, on demand, by rubbing sticks together or banging stones for their sparks.

It's not my intent to fully teach specific stone age skills in this article. I do wish to share the benefits of a more primitive and harmonious lifestyle, one that is allowed to be shaped by the rhythms, patterns and cycles inherent around us. One way of accomplishing this is through the adoption and practice of innate (but mostly forgotten) pre-historic crafts: creating fire, foraging for wild edibles, and creating simple and effective stone, bone and wood tools. These skills can be an important asset to those of

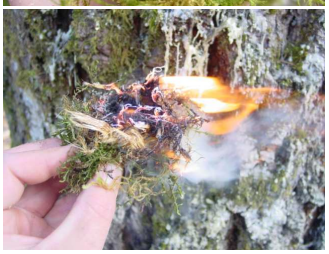
us who spend a lot of time in the field, no matter what missions were on.

The next time you find yourself on the shore of a creek, river or ocean, pick up a smooth, oval-shaped cobblestone. As the accompanying photos suggest, place this rock (end-wise) upon a larger, stable stone. Take a third rock—your hammerstone—and strike your cobble forcefully on its upper end. A thin flake should detach from the parent rock—you've just created a discoidal stone blade, one of humanity's most ancient cutting tools (2.6 million year-old stone flakes have been found in Ethiopia). Your new stone knife will cut grasses, roots, inner barks and leaves for cordage-making, and meat quite effectively.

I have discovered some of the rewards afforded by a more direct relationship with nature. Here's the cause and effects:

Mechanism: Living more lightly within the landscape. If just 1 in 100 people yearned to incorporate primitive skills into her lifestyle, those in power would feel our positive impact--not only from our reduced energy consumption, but from our rejection of throw-away consumerism. Less demand is less production is less pollution.

Internal Benefit: Self Sufficiency. Imagine being able to provide for your every need—all year 'round. Needing supplies occasionally, you travel a short distance to barter with another culture. Hand gestures and well-timed glances guide the proceedings...you provide these people with elk antler...they offer obsidian cobbles...everyone leaves content. No industrial, interstate travel, no fossil fuel expenditure; decrease in the insect and viral pest migration vectors (namely the export of poultry and grain around the world). No migration of labor, money, natural resources, etc. Everything you ever make or do will return to the earth as it was taken.



Internal Benefit: Freedom. Freedom to go anywhere, anytime, and feel comfortable that your level of skill will propel you through any circumstances that arise. Free from worry about food, water, shelter and warmth. With some knowledge, honed by experience, you know you will be able to provide yourself with the necessities of life.

External Benefit: Reintegration. Earth is the very matrix of which we are composed. Can you recall the time when you could understand the language of nature? We all walk amongst a living calendar, one in which we participate, if not hesitantly. The raucous territorial cries of the barred owls usher in the new year. The emergence of salmonberry flowers

informs me that salmon fry are plentiful in the shallow edges of local creeks. I know it's time to collect the inner bark of western red cedar when silver-spotted tiger moth caterpillars are seen grazing upon hemlock and Douglas fir needles in preparation for their upcoming transformations. Salt is made in the spring from dried coltsfoot herb.

There are thousands of primitive skills practitioners here in North America. You can find these folks through word-of-mouth--we tend to be known by local boy and girl scout troops, museum curators, classroom teachers, anthropology professors, and so on. There are very informative and insightful websites that have comprehensive lists of primitive skills schools found in Europe, Canada and the U.S. (www.hollowtop.com is among the best). You can also search for Gatherings (like Winter Count, Rabbit Stick, Falling Leaves) around the country, which provide opportunities for you to learn from the masters of the crafts. Solid ethnographic information on the edible and medicinal uses of plants can be had by visiting the Plants for a Future database (www.pfaf.org--catalog of over 7000 species!) and the Native American Ethnobotany Database (http://herb.umd.umich.edu).

With my back to the opening of this living shelter, I exert increased downward pressure upon the rotating elderberry shaft. A whisper of smoke arises from the union of the firesticks, but as any practitioners of hand drill can attest to, whomever coined the old adage, "where there's smoke, there's fire" certainly never tried doing this. My daily attempts to achieve fire with these particular sticks have been fruitless so far. Nickel-sized blisters on each of my palms challenge me further: In this case, pain must be accepted in order for me to cook tonight's meal of Stropharia *mushrooms (one of my favorite fungi for the pot).*

With a few more near-desperate turns of the spindle I see a brief flash of orange-red as the wood powder begins to combust and coalesce into a coal. Flames will feed and warm me tonight. Such is the provenance of our symbiotic relationship with elemental fire.