

Nature and Man: Cleaning Up for Each Other

By Dennis Payton Knight

Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man. – Henry Adams, 1870

All sorts of animal and plant species exist in nature; some, like the crafty coyote thrive, others, like the clumsy dodo, perish. But the only species that attempts to organize itself in defiance of nature is homo sapiens, and it is the only species to exploit nature and turn it against itself. Seen from another planet, nature and the human have a codependent, love-hate relationship like no other.

Nature, in its sublime order, is a bloom on a thorny rose bush, a dandelion gone to fluffy seed floating in the meadow's breeze. It is soft rain in the dell, white snow on the mountain, a grasshopper munching a blade, a flicker tormenting a cottonwood, a pronghorn in the sage, an owl on the hunt, a peacock on the strut.

Humans have the deepest appreciation for the wonders of nature and we celebrate it in poetry and song. We drive through it, hike through it, climb up it and ski down it. We fish it, sail it, swim it, and fly over it. We listen to its music, dance to its rhythms, and inhale in its fragrance.

Nature, in its sublime chaos, is an avalanche in Vail, a flood on the Big Thompson, a hailstorm in Golden. It's Katrina in New Orleans, Harvey in Houston, Irma in the Keys, Maria in Puerto Rico. It's a forest fire in Oregon, the Rocky Mountain locust swarming two hundred thousand square miles of the Western United States in 1874, and a caldera, barely dormant, waiting to explode in Yellowstone Park.

Humans, in our chaos, are as destructive of nature as she is of us, our places, our things. In the name of progress, we poison her skies and waters, ravage her forests, plow her grasses, and melt her glaciers. Worst, we have poisoned her atmosphere, causing a warming of the globe that threatens nature itself and all her denizens, including mankind.

Yet, for all our failed maneuverings, we step up for each other in the face of nature's terrible, magnificent destruction. We rise to our best to help restore our nature's wonders to sublime order, cleaning up after nature shows her wrath.

And nature, for her part, has a remarkable capacity to clean up the chaos of man. The lands and forests we exploit to death, and then abandon, are soon recovered as if we had never been there. The waters we pollute ever filter themselves to become places of new life. War torn, polluted soils leach themselves clean with grasses and cleansing rains. Natural fires have a way of creating new places for the return of owls on the hunt, deer in the dell, eagles on the wing, and jays to rob the camps we stake in the forest.

Man cleans up for nature, nature cleans up for man. A remarkable dynamic. Long may it last.