

Tracking Our Natural Roots

by David Moskowitz

There has been a recent surge of interest in the art of tracking, other primitive technologies and outdoor living skills. Why is this? What is drawing people from their urban and suburban lives and into the woods to follow wild creatures, make fires with hand drills, or make stone tools? Clearly, these are no longer essential skills for our physical survival. Is this just another form of recreation? Are these skills vital for our survival in some less obvious way?

I believe these skills are important for our survival as a species.

In this article, I propose that we need to look at the art of survival in a holistic manner, not in the way it is often presented in the tracking and outdoors survival context. To do this, we must first explore the evolution of tracking in human culture, what tracking teaches us, and how it does this. [While I am only referring to the art of tracking, this is out of convenience and is not to exclude other primitive skills which draw the student to learn directly from the natural world.]

History: People as Hunters and Gatherers

Several authors have argued that tracking was a precursor to humans forming written language and even symbolic thought itself. [1] Hunter-Gatherer cultures relied on keen observations of the natural world to find food and avoid hazards. They related very strongly to the plants and animals that they lived with and depended on for their survival. Humans felt strongly connected to the natural world around them on both a physical and spiritual level. This relationship became the focus of religious and ceremonial activities. They recognized pieces of themselves in the actions and cultures of the plants and animals. One of the main ways they related to these beings was through tracking and activities which evolved from the root activity of tracking -- being a keen observer of the physical and spiritual relationships between the different pieces of their world. To be an observer in this way is to be a tracker.

What and How Tracking Teaches

If all that I was learning when I went out tracking was how to identify the signs of wildlife and a bit about their life histories, I think tracking would have lost much of its interest for me a long time ago. From my personal experience, as well as from watching the experiences of others who have explored the art of tracking, I have discovered that tracking teaches a great deal more.

On a very physical, concrete level, tracking is teaching us to be acute observers, and about the lives of the wild creatures and elements that live with us here on Earth. If pursued diligently one may learn a great deal about problem solving, paying attention to detail, and perseverance (to solve those truly baffling mysteries it often takes years). When we dig deeper we see that over time, practicing the art of tracking teaches compassion, perspective, creativity and opens the tracker to a cyclical perspective on time and the workings of the world. Perhaps in its deepest level, tracking teaches what indigenous peoples have called "Our Original Instructions"--what it means to be human and to walk on the Earth in harmony with our surroundings and nurture our relationships with those around us, human and otherwise.

This might seem a lot to ask of something that at first seems so simple. One of my first experiences with tracking involved following the tracks of some deer around in circles backwards (I didn't know what was the front of the print and what was the back) in the mud and rain in central California at the age of 15. The last thing I was thinking about was "This is teaching me about how to be a better person". All I was thinking was "Where the heck are those deer?! I've walked in a complete circle and they are nowhere to be found and now I'm following my own footprints following the deer [backwards]." Looking back, I can clearly see the magic of tracking already at work in this brief experience. At the time, I was blind to the metaphors and deeper meanings of this brief experience, but this did not stop me from beginning to learn subconsciously. I was learning many things, including: paying attention to details, problem solving ("How am I going to figure out where they went, seeing as I am back to where I started"), empathy ("so this is what it's like to be a deer during the rainy season out here in the mud and wind"), and humility ("Well, I guess I'm not as good at this as I thought"). Even now this one small experience is teaching me. Now I see deeper teachings such as a model for how the natural world teaches humans, and a metaphor for how we approach situations when we come from a place of ignorance. Where else am I stumbling around in the mud and rain through the brush, going in circles because of my ignorance? Tracking always seems to give me new challenges to work on, as I get comfortable.

Tracking teaches about relationships -- specifically that we are all related. I am tied to that deer I was tracking, and we are tied to the tree that gave up its life (if you are reading this article on a piece of paper). If you are reading by an electric light (or on a computer) in the Pacific Northwest then you are tied to the dams on the Columbia River which supply electricity (at the expense of the salmon to whom you are also connected). When you pluck any strand of a spider web, the vibration is felt throughout. We all (salmon, trees, and people) have a role to play in maintaining a healthy place to live on this planet. Unfortunately, we as a society are in many ways like I was at the age of 15, tracking that deer -- acting from a place of ignorance. Tracking is an effective tool for moving from a place of ignorance to a place of awareness, and this is why it is still a vital tool for survival in this day and age of the computer and supermarket. Perhaps it is even more vital now than it was in the past. A hunter-gatherer society wielded a lot less power in its relationship to its surroundings if its members acted from a place of ignorance, than we do now.

Tracking works because it forces the practitioner to be both outwardly and inwardly observant, to pay attention both to what is going on around as well as within. An experience I had early on in my tracking career illustrates this point very well. The following is an excerpt from my tracking journal:

In the game of tracking it is very easy to trick yourself and come up with false conclusions if you have preset expectations of the answer in your mind. You can make your mind believe there are the vaguest of tracks where there are none. I just did this as I back-tracked myself through the pines, down the dirt road I had traveled up earlier. I had forgotten I had taken a game trail short-cut and as I back-tracked I continued down the road. Soon I noticed that I couldn't find my tracks—so I started looking very closely. There was a set of tire tracks that I was familiar with from going out this morning. Using this clue I decided my tracks HAD to be on the road. I figured the frozen ground in the morning had made the tracks barely noticeable (although 100 yards before they were quite apparent). I thought I could make out the vaguest outlines of my boot print and was about to continue on but my gut told me it wasn't right—I ran back to the junction and quickly found where my trail cut in from the game trail. It is important not to bias the clues with preconceived notions as to the reality of what happened. **Listen to your gut before you make decisions.**

This story and my original thoughts about it clearly demonstrate how my practice of tracking was simultaneously teaching me to be a keener observer both of the world around me as well as my own mental and perceptual process.

The lessons I gleaned from this experience carried far beyond just making me better at following a trail. I think of this experience when I am confronted with all sorts of problems that I can't get a handle on. I have found that problems that pop up for me in tracking often have counterparts in other parts of my life (such as approaching other people with preconceived notions about who they are or what my relationship to them is or should be).

When I start thinking about the monumental tasks of confronting my personal shortcomings, as well as those of the society I live in, I can become overwhelmed if I am not careful. Again, learning from my experience with tracking, I have learned to see problems as opportunities for growth. I see this awareness as extremely exciting. I have a tool, a skill, and a method to bring myself into a place of awareness so that I can act in a way that will positively affect those around me. It is a skill which I can share with others who might be interested for a wide variety of reasons besides wanting to be a happier individual or wanting to save the world. But deep down, I realize that I am planting seeds in those around me that they might choose to nurture when the time is right for them. I am not attached to this part of tracking when I teach tracking especially to young people (often they don't even realize that I am teaching them tracking skills at all). This was not what I was interested in when I was first beginning ("Where the hell are those deer?"). There are many other reasons why people consciously come to the art of tracking and outdoors skills. As a teacher, I take it upon myself to meet my students where they are and teach to their interests at the time (another lesson learned through tracking-teaching tracking). If they want to track rare carnivores through the mountains rather than the raccoons in their backyard, then let's start there, eventually the tracks will take them back home. They have for me and I can see them doing the same for others that I have had the opportunity to work with over time.

The Survival of Our Natural Roots

As we have progressively built taller and thicker walls between ourselves and the natural world, we have not only sheltered ourselves from the physical discomforts we once encountered there, we have cut ourselves off from our original source of learning, inspiration, and insight. As we have amassed huge amounts of knowledge about any number of topics we have also progressively detached ourselves from the foundations of what gives that knowledge (and our lives) meaning. We cannot "go back". Tracking offers a bridge, bringing ancient wisdom from the earth back into our lives, nurturing our primal needs for connections to our source and providing us with a model for a sustainable future for our children and ourselves. Tracking was an integral part of our evolution as a species on a physical, cultural, and spiritual level. I believe it is these deep roots which have made it so attractive to many people and why it can be a powerful tool for reconnecting to the natural world. It can also lead our culture in a direction which is more connected and respectful of nature.

Tracking offers us a powerful tool for survival. Tracking helped our ancestors hunt down their prey and discover food plants but it also helped them learn how to live in and with the world around them. It taught them to see themselves within and in relationship to their surroundings, rather than separate or beyond their environment. It is this insight and awareness that we desperately need now to survive and prosper. Going back to the woods and relearning these ancient skills can help connect us to our natural roots and make us more human. In this personal evolution we can have an opportunity to bring these new insights into our community's culture.

It is clear that our current way of relating to the world is not sustainable. In order to grow into a more sustainable society, I believe we must first track down and nurture our natural roots.

[1] Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. New York: Pantheon Books. 1996.

Shepard, Paul. *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*. Washington D.C.: Island Press.