

Olaus Murie's Spiritual Connection with Wilderness

BY JAMES M. GLOVER

In the early 1950s the U.S. National Park Service considered building a church on the south rim of the Grand Canyon. Olaus J. Murie thought it was a bad idea. "Architectural gymnastics," he argued, would not add to the sacredness of the place. He continued as follows:

The Grand Canyon and the other beautiful and meaningful dedicated portions of our wonderful earth, should not be cluttered with mere man-made-contrivances. ... And we human beings should forget our modern exultation in material progress and approach the Grand Canyon and similar places with humility, in the hope that we can improve ourselves (Murie, ca 1953).



Article author James M. Glover.

By that time Murie was into his sixties but still active in wilderness issues. As reflected in that quote, he had developed a spiritual attitude toward the Earth and its natural processes that was reflected in nearly everything he did.

Murie rarely gets mentioned these days among the great heroes of wilderness preservation. But he should, for several reasons. For starters, through direct experience, he was probably more familiar with the wildest places in North America than anyone has ever been. His skills as a wilderness traveler were extraordinary,

built up over years of studying caribou, elk, grizzlies, and many other species for the U.S. Biological Survey. He made landmark studies of North American elk and caribou, was one of the first scientists to point out the ecological relationship between wolves and caribou, and was among the

first scientists to take up the cause of predators and raptors on both ecological and ethical grounds. As an activist, he was directly involved in several of the most significant preservation efforts of the 20th century. He wrote prolifically of the American wilderness and its wildlife. He illustrated several books with very accomplished drawings of animals and landscapes. In his later years, he served as a kindly mentor to a variety of young naturalists and conservationists who would in turn make an impact in conservation (Glover 1989; Kendrick 1978; Murie 1952).

But despite all his tangible accomplishments (and there were many more than those mentioned here), what fascinates me most, and what I admire most, about Murie, is that deep spiritual connection to the earth. He felt it as early as the summer of 1920, when he found himself camped in Denali National Park as part of his landmark study of Alaskan caribou ecology. Writing to his fiancée, Margaret Thomas, back in Fairbanks, he said: "I guess I am still enrolled in the Lutheran Church at home, but there is no one church or creed with which I fully agree. For one thing, I am crazy about Nature, and almost worship it, but isn't Nature the direct work of God?" (Murie 1920)

This spirituality of Murie's, then, was not some costume he wore to impress others, or a fad he went through on the way to maturity. It was his maturity. It takes maturity to really accept the unimportance of human achievements, or to recognize how much humans do *not* know, or to understand that it's sometimes best to leave things alone.

These and other aspects of Murie's philosophy, it turns out, are remarkably similar to those advocated some 2,500 years ago, in the *Tao de Ching*. I say "remarkably" because there's no evidence that Murie ever read much or received any instruction about Taoism. He seems to have found it on his own without realizing it had a label. Or, perhaps more likely, he had some idea that his philosophy was much

like the ancient Taoists, but did not care to label himself.

In either case, Murie's philosophy and actions fit well into such Taoist principles as noninterference, nonaction, the importance—even the beauty—of death, the value of intuitive knowledge, and the sacredness of cycles.

Another Taoist precept is humility, which Murie valued greatly. If you will forgive the paradox, he took great pride in his humility. He also thought it should be carefully developed in every child, cultivated by every nation.

What Murie saw instead was a culture growing increasingly arrogant toward other cultures and toward nature. Examples, for Murie, were everywhere, especially in the years after World War II when a sort of blind faith in technology seemed to sweep the country. The arrogance was there in the effort to do away with "harmful" forms of wildlife, in the construction of enormous dams to "control" wild rivers, in the spraying of chemical pesticides from airplanes in the cattle country of the west, and in the usurpation of wildlands by a rapidly growing military.

Murie expressed concern about all these major issues. Even more revealing, perhaps, was his concern with the small signs of expanding human arrogance. He was disgusted by the relatively harmless practice of naming natural features after human beings. Similarly, he opposed the construction of human monuments, especially in places where the much greater power and mystery of natural processes were on display. This opposition resulted in an ironic situation when he died, in the fall of 1963. Admirers wanted to build a rather large monument to Murie in Jackson, Wyoming. His widow, Margaret, had to argue strenuously to prevent them from doing so, knowing that it would violate one of Olaus's strongest beliefs.



Members of the 1954 Murie Arctic Expedition that resulted in establishment of Arctic National Wildlife "Range" in 1960. Left to right: Olaus Murie, Mardy Murie, Murie family doctor who visited, George Schaller, Brina Kessel. Courtesy Robert Krear.

You might be surprised that Murie was not especially keen on the effort by his partner in The Wilderness Society, Howard Zahniser, to get a wilderness bill passed. As most readers know, Zahniser's effort did result in The Wilderness Act of 1964 and the creation of a federal wilderness system. Murie's uncertainty was based on two concerns. The first was that Zahniser, for about eight years, was focusing nearly all of The Wilderness Society's resources on a piece of legislation that stood an excellent chance of never being adopted, much like a high stakes gambler who bets it all on one hand. In the meantime, Murie feared, real wilderness in real places was slipping away.

Second, Murie was suspicious of efforts to create a centralized governmental "system" to solve a problem that, in his view, could best be addressed through educational efforts and grassroots movements in specific regions. Much of Murie's viewpoint on this issue was colored by his own experience working for the federal

government—the U.S. Biological Survey—for nearly 25 years. He had seen the potential for corruption, incompetence, and counterproductive results that such a centralized system holds. He had personally experienced being given orders from an office 5,000 miles away that had no relevance to his real work. He had seen his agency sold out to industries bent on extirpating everything from wolves to magpies in order to better mass-produce corn and cattle. He had seen some of his own research suppressed when it did not conform to bureau policies. And, on at least one occasion, he found himself forbidden to give a presentation at a wildlife conference because of what he had to say.

And so, his own experience reinforced what his Taoist-like intuition probably told him: that centralized, legalistic approaches to problems are easily corrupted—or are a sign of a culture already corrupted. One is reminded of the chapter in the *Tao de Ching* that reads in part:

It takes maturity to really accept the *unimportance* of human achievements, or to recognize how much humans do *not* know, or to understand that it's sometimes best to leave things alone.

The more laws and restrictions there are,
The poorer people become ...
The more rules and regulations,
The more thieves and robbers
(Lau Tzu 1989).

It seems today that Murie was wrong and Zahniser was right, having won his all-or-nothing gamble. No doubt, had he lived to see this, Murie would have been delighted to be proven wrong. In any case, again, Murie's skepticism about a wilderness bill, though surprising at first glance, was consistent with his philosophy.

The great challenge for Murie was to do what he could within a culture whose institutions seemed increasingly

to represent values he opposed, such as the single-minded pursuit of wealth. Murie's written statements, speeches, and letters are full of reminders that economic values are not the only ones humans ought to have. He enjoyed pointing out, much like Thoreau did, that material wealth can be more enslaving than liberating. Once, in response to the common cry that wilderness was just a playground for the rich, he replied, "Many of us who travel in wilderness have not been burdened by large bank accounts."

In his writing, Murie was a minimalist before it was considered a cultural trend. He used short, clear declarative sentences. There was no academic jargon, and no wasted words. The result was four books and a couple hundred articles ranging from technical academic reports to essays in magazines like *Audubon*, *The Living Wilderness*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*.

To me, his masterpiece is *A Field Guide to Animal Tracks*. First published in 1954, it was one of the first guides in the famous Peterson series, and it's still in print. To borrow an overused phrase from the marketing business, it's much more than a field guide. Murie did his own drawings for it, including pictures of most mammals, their tracks, and their other signs. In the drawings, the animals all have a friendly look about them that I believe subconsciously expresses Murie's affection for them. The narrative, meanwhile, goes way beyond identification marks of tracks, describing the animals' behaviors and Murie's

experiences with many of them. My favorite is this one, about wolves:

One night four of us, including our year-old baby, were encamped on a gravel bar of the Porcupine River, in northeastern Alaska. It was clear September weather, and we slept that night in the open without a tent. At dawn we were awakened by a voice across the river. Soon we realized we were being serenaded by two wolves, one upstream, the other below our camp. First one, then the other, raised its muzzle and howled. Apparently we were intruding on their home ground. At any rate, we lay there in the crisp autumn morning, comfortable in our sleeping bags, and listened to this song of the Arctic wilderness with a feeling of awe. (Murie 1954, p. 93)

You don't get something like that in too many field guides.

The two most important preservation efforts that Murie led were the addition of Jackson Hole Valley to Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming and the establishment of the Arctic National Wildlife Range (now Refuge).

The Jackson Hole National Monument controversy began in March 1943 when President Franklin Roosevelt created a national monument from some 221,610 acres (89,720 hectares) of national forest, state, and private land in the flat sage country east of Grand Teton National Park. Murie thought this was a good idea because he saw the Tetons and the adjacent valley as a whole unit. He saw little point in preserving the mountains while developing the adjacent valley, which would likely be done if some protection were not given it.

The majority of Jackson Hole residents, however, were bitterly resentful



Murie in Alaska with favorite sled dog, Jack. Photo by Jesse Rust, courtesy Mardy Murie.

of Roosevelt's act and vowed to do everything possible to fight the monument. The argument became heated, emotional, and sometimes personal. Murie was accused of various misdeeds. A false rumor went around that he had stated that a mouse was more important than a human. He was thought to be a tool of the federal government, and was called various unflattering names.

No fewer than four conservation groups also opposed the monument at first. Two of these were The Wilderness Society (of which Murie was not yet director) and the National Parks and Conservation Association. They mainly objected because the new monument would include a large human-made intrusion, the Jackson Lake Dam. Murie turned those two groups around, primarily through an article called "The Spirit of Jackson Hole," in which he emphasized the ecological connection between the valley and the adjacent mountains.

The other two groups whose minds he changed were the game-oriented Izaak Walton League and Federation of Western Outdoor Clubs. At a gathering of the latter group in Utah, a club official who thought the monument would destroy elk hunting in the region tried to prevent Murie from speaking. A motion overruling the official had to be passed. Murie then explained that elk migration routes would be *protected* by the monument and that adjacent national forests would continue to allow hunting. The clubs, as Murie later recalled, then "changed their attitude" toward the monument.

There were various other turf disputes, lawsuits, and congressional hearings before the monument was finally added to Grand Teton National Park in 1950. In one of the suits, Murie was a star witness for the Park Service,

again asserting that the valley and the mountains should be seen as a unit.

Had Murie not been willing to be ostracized in his community, or unable to change the minds of four conservation groups, the Jackson Hole Valley might look much different today than it does. There would still be some wildlife around, but the buffalo would be roaming and antelope playing among a lot more condominiums, T-shirt shops, putting greens, and motels than is now the case.

Crowning Achievement: The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

As many know, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge of northeast Alaska and adjacent Northern Yukon National Park of Canada, comprise one of the last great wild places on Earth and one of the last great wildlife spectacles. Every summer, the coastal plain turns into a riot of color and animal activity. Caribou, musk ox, grizzly bears, polar bears, wolves, and other large mammals have the space they need. G'witchen people still build their culture around the wide-ranging porcupine caribou herd.

Murie first visited the region in 1926 and felt it was a very special place. By the 1950s he and a few others decided that it urgently needed protection from military, oil, mineral, and other interests that were impacting the arctic regions. And so, in 1956, Murie organized and led a summer-long expedition to inventory the natural history there. The information would be used in a proposal to make the region a two-nation international park.

The expedition crew was small: Murie, his wife Mardy, two university scientists, and an undergraduate zoology major named George Schaller



Murie painting an albatross aboard the *Brown Bear*, August 1937. Photo by Victor Scheffer. Courtesy Scheffer and National Archives.

who had written Murie offering to work for free.

The survey lasted a couple of months. All would later agree it was among the highlights of their lives. The work involved seemed almost incidental to the magical experience of living in one of the last great wild places in the world—the "Serengeti of the North," as it is sometimes called. Murie had given the crew a little speech at the beginning of the summer, reminding them to be aware of the experience for its own sake, and what a privilege it was to have it.

In any case, the data were collected, a film was made, and at summer's end the crew disbanded. Olaus and Mardy Murie went back home and spent most of the next four years convincing the U.S. government to protect that region. They organized people, wrote articles, talked to groups around the country, and went to Washington to testify at hearings on the matter. At some point it became clear that the United States was not going to go for



Olaus and Mardy Murie in Jackson Hole in late 1950s. Courtesy Mardy Murie.

the permanent protection that national park status would offer. Canada, of course, did make a national park on its side of the border. Finally, however, in 1960 the U.S. interior secretary declared a large chunk of the region a National Wildlife Range. It was less than hoped for, but it gave Murie an enormous sense of joy and relief. Upon hearing the news, he wept openly—one of the few times in his adult life he did so.

The “range” was made a “refuge,” and expanded to eight million acres (3.2 million hectares) in 1980 as part of the famous Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. Today, of course, it remains controversial because of the large amount of oil that may (or may not) lie under the coastal plain.

A Transition

Murie died, at age 74, in October 1963. He was interested in wilderness and environmental matters until the end. He sent information on western pesticide abuse to Rachel Carson and began referring to the Cold War era as “the age of poison.”

He was not bitter, though. One day, George Schaller, the former student who joined Murie on the 1956 Arctic survey, came to visit. Schaller had been studying primates in Africa. His later book, *The Serengeti Lion: A Study in Predator-Prey Relationships* (1972) would win the National Book Award and he would be awarded the World Wildlife Fund Gold Medal for contributing to the protection of endangered species. Schaller once said that Murie

had taught him “that the collecting of scientific facts is only the first step of a long process to give work meaning and value” (Schaller 1986). When he visited Murie, they took a short hike into the Teton hills. Murie was weak and could not go far, yet he still loved being outside. Schaller watched with admiration as Murie carefully snapped photographs and remarked at the vibrant colors of wildflowers he had seen and photographed hundreds of times before. Soon after that hike, Murie died and Schaller published his first book, *The Mountain Gorilla* (1963). It was dedicated to Olaus Murie. ❧

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