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The Psychopathology of the Human-Nature Relationship

RALPH METZNER

RALPH METZNER IS AMONG the leading theorists of "green psychology." In this essay, he critiques the many ideas that have been put forward to explain the alienation between the human species and the natural world. His survey is an instructive example of how standard psychological categories (addiction, dissociation, autism, amnesia) might be used as "diagnostic metaphors" to illuminate a central ecological question: how to identify the historical transition that accounts for human beings' peculiar capacity to distance themselves from their habitat—especially as that distancing has been exaggerated in the religious and scientific beliefs of Western society.

Several different diagnostic metaphors have been proposed to explain the ecologically disastrous split—the pathological alienation—between human consciousness and the rest of the biosphere. None of these psychological diagnoses have been made by psychologists, who seem to have taken no interest in this question thus far. From one point of view these concepts are metaphors, analogies transferred from the realm of individual psychopathology to society or even to the entire species and

its relation to the nonhuman natural world. From another, they are diagnostic tools that could be applied to the realm of collective or mass psychology, on a par with Wilhelm Reich's *Mass Psychology of Fascism* or Lloyd deMause's psychoanalytic interpretations of (mostly modern) historic events. In any case, the purpose of such diagnostic speculation is the same: to discern the nature of the psychological disturbance that has *Homo sapiens* in its grip, so that we can apply psychotherapeutic techniques and treatments to the amelioration of the present ecocatastrophe.

Paul Shepard in his book *Nature and Madness* was the first person to articulate a psychopathological metaphor for our destructive and exploitative treatment of the natural world. Drawing on the work of psychoanalytic developmental psychologists such as Erik Erikson and Harold Searles, Shepard brilliantly dissected the cultural pathology of Western Judeo-Christian civilization as a case of arrested development, or what he called "ontogenetic crippling." He traced the progressive distortion of normal developmental pathways, which could still be seen in surviving hunter-gatherer societies, through four historical stages: agricultural domestication, the desert fathers, the puritans, and the founders of mechanistic science.

A particularly interesting feature of Shepard's analysis is his discussion of the interplay between neoteny, the extended period of immaturity and dependency of the human child, and the ontogenetic support provided by culture. This long developmental process makes the growing child particularly vulnerable. In the case of a species with such marked neoteny as the human, the failure or disappearance of culturally provided developmental supports would have devastating consequences. In his use of paleolithic hunter-gatherers as models of ecologically balanced societies, Shepard says that with the advent of domestication, approximately twelve thousand years ago, civilized humanity began to pervert or lose the developmental practices that had functioned healthily for hundreds of thousands of years.

He sees two stages in which ancient patterns of development may have become chronically incomplete: infant/caregiver relationships and adolescent transition rites. The distorting process "first began with a slight twist in the life of the child, with events that may only have marred his capacity for elderhood and judgment. . . . The history of Western man has been a progressive peeling back of the psyche, as if the earliest agriculture may have addressed itself to extenuation of adolescent concerns while the most modern era seeks to evoke in society at large some of the fixations of early natality." Shepard argues that agriculture increased the distance between the growing child and the nonhuman or "wild" world of nature: "By aggravating the tensions of separation from the mother and at the same time spatially isolating the individual from the nonhumanized world, agriculture made it difficult for the developing person to approach the issues around which the crucial passages into fully mature adult life had been structured in the course of human existence."[1]

In Erikson's developmental model, adolescence is the time when the child is enmeshed in a conflict between "identity and identity diffusion." The notion of a species-wide fixation at the stage of early adolescence fits with the kind of boisterous, arrogant pursuit of individual self-assertion that characterizes the consumerist, exploitative model of economic growth, where the short-term profit of entrepreneurs and corporate shareholders seems to be not only the dominant value, but the only value under consideration. It also fits with the aggressive and predatory militarism and emphasis on the values and ideals of male warrior cults that have characterized Western civilization since the Bronze Age. Adolescents who have difficulty negotiating the turmoil of this stage often become, as Erikson writes, "remarkably clannish, intolerant and cruel in their exclusion of others who are 'different' in skin color or cultural background." Erikson points out how totalitarian doctrines have a special appeal to youths looking for solid identity structures: "The tempestuous adolescence lived through in patriarchal and agrarian countries . . . explains the fact that their young people find convincing and satisfactory identities in the simple totalitarian doctrines of race, class or nation."[2]

Rites of passage in traditional societies provided guiding structures for negotiating the transition from the family matrix to the larger society. The progressive deterioration and loss of adolescent rites of passage in the modern age is well known. Robert Bly has pointed out how even the

1. Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1982), pp. 16, 40.
2. Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: Norton, 1980), p. 98.

minimal father-to-son apprenticeship bonding that used to exist prior to the Industrial Revolution has eroded. Some of the only remnants of manhood transition rites involving elders are the boot camp and combat initiations by the military. Beyond that, there is only the stunted futility of attempted peer-group initiation, whether in the pathetic form of college fraternity hazing or in the casual violence of juvenile street gangs, where twelve-year-olds carry handguns to school to avenge imagined insults to their "home" band.

Besides the loss of adolescent initiation rites, Shepard points to the "unity pathology" that develops if the earliest stage of infant/caregiver bonding is disrupted or disturbed. Erikson identifies this as the stage where the child's developing sense of self deals with issues of "basic trust vs. mistrust." If this stage is not negotiated successfully, we may have, at best, an attitude of chronic insecurity and, at worst, the disposition to suspicion and violence of the paranoid psychotic. As Shepard says, "The social skills of the newborn and the mother's equally indigenous reciprocity create not only the primary social tie but the paradigm for existential attitudes."[3] Jean Liedloff's studies of mother-infant bonding among the Amazonian Indians and her "continuum concept" support Shepard's assertion that babies and parents in hunter-gatherer societies have an intense early attachment that leads not to prolonged dependency but to a better-functioning nervous system.

Shepard summarizes his theory of ontogenetic crippling by stating that "men [presumably he means "Western industrialized humans"] may now be the possessors of the world's flimsiest identity structure—by Paleolithic standards, childish adults."[4] One of the worst consequences of this collective pathology is "a readiness to strike back at a natural world that we dimly perceive as having failed us." Adults who have basic trust that the world of nature and society can provide for their needs are not likely to be attracted to a worldview that demands a relentless struggle for competitive advantage. Government leaders and opinion makers in the United States are now in the habit of promoting "competitiveness" as the value that the educational system should develop in the nation's children. We are suffering, Shepard says, from "an epidemic of the psychopathic mutilation of ontogeny."

3. Shepard, *Nature and Madness*, p. 85.
4. Shepard, *Nature and Madness*, p. 124.

A related psychopathological metaphor put forward by theologian-turned-*geologian* Thomas Berry is that the human species has become "autistic" in relationship to the natural world. He traces the origin of this autism to Descartes's invention of the mechanistic worldview: "Descartes . . . killed the Earth and all its living beings. For him the natural world was mechanism. There was no possibility of entering into a communion relationship. Western humans became autistic in relation to the surrounding world." Like autistic children, who do not seem to hear, or see, or feel their mother's presence, we have become blind to the psychic presence of the living planet and deaf to its voices and stories, sources that nourished our ancestors in preindustrial societies. This situation can be remedied only by "a new mode of mutual presence between the human and the natural world."

The current version of the diagnostic manual of the American Psychiatric Association, the DSM-III-R, describes autism as a "pervasive developmental disorder" characterized by "qualitative impairment in reciprocal social interaction . . . qualitative impairment in verbal and nonverbal communication and in imaginative activity (such as role-playing, fantasy) . . . and markedly restricted repertoire of activities and interests." Stereotyped movements and behavior, restricted range of interests, obsessive routines, preoccupation with parts of objects, absence of imaginative play and lack of awareness of the feelings of others are all typical of autistic children. These characteristics can readily be observed in many adults of industrial society when compared to those brought up in oral cultures.

The cause of infantile autism is not known; earlier views that it was caused by deficient mothering have given way to the general belief that it is a biochemical brain disorder. Some autistic children respond to vitamin B6 therapy; others to heroic and prolonged efforts by caregivers to dissolve the perceptual-affective barriers. Most are untreatable. It is clearly an extreme form of developmental deficit — and if this diagnosis of our cultural malaise is indeed correct, the prospects for humanity are not good.

A third metaphor from psychopathology that offers considerable insight is the model of *addiction*. We are a society whose scientists and experts have been describing for forty years, in horrifying and mind-numbing detail, the dimensions of global eco-catastrophe. Just think of

some of the book-titles: *Silent Spring, The Population Bomb, The Death of Nature, The End of Nature*. Our inability to stop our suicidal and ecocidal behavior fits the clinical definition of addiction or compulsion: behavior that continues in spite of the individual knowing that it is destructive to self, family, work, and social relationships. This metaphor of addiction or compulsion, on a vast scale, also parallels in many ways the teachings of the Asian spiritual traditions, especially Buddhism, which acknowledge suffering as an inevitable dimension of human consciousness and desire as the root of suffering.

One of the first to develop the addiction diagnosis was the Deep Ecologist and mountaineer Dolores LaChapelle in her book *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex*. In a chapter entitled "Addiction, Capitalism and the New World Ripoff," she analyzes the interrelationships between the pursuit of addictive substances, including gold, silver, sugar, and narcotics, and the insidious global spread of the capital-accumulating, growth-oriented industrial society from the sixteenth century to the present. Several other authors have also pointed to the addictive quality of our relationship to fossil fuels, another major force of unrestrained industrial growth and ecological destruction. More generally, one can see the spread of consumerism and the obsession with industrial-economic growth as signs of an addictive society. Chellis Glendinning, drawing on ideas from Louis Mumford and Jacques Ellul, has analyzed the "techno-addiction" that characterizes industrial civilization, with its own compulsive craving for better machines, its pervasive denial, and the blatant attraction to "re-traumatization."

Descendants of the pirate bands of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the modern transnational corporations are operating essentially as high-tech bandits, plundering the biosphere, focusing exclusively on the highest profit rate for their investors. As corporations, they are legal fictions, capital accumulation machines, with not even human interests, values, or ethics to restrain them, much less any concern for the intrinsic value of nonhuman beings. Buckminster Fuller called the multinationals the modern incarnations of mythic suprahuman giants. Nevertheless, since they are giants created by humans, there does exist the somewhat hopeful possibility of humans dismantling or transforming these corporate giants—presumably this is the self-appointed task of the "corporate responsibility" movement.

Yet another analogy is the notion that we as a species are suffering from a kind of *collective amnesia*. We have forgotten something our ancestors once knew and practiced—certain attitudes and kinds of perception, an ability to empathize and identify with nonhuman life, respect for the mysterious, and humility in relationship to the infinite complexities of the natural world. It may be that at several crucial turning points in the history of human consciousness we chose a particular line of development and thereby forgot and neglected something—with fateful consequences. Paul Devereux and his collaborators, in their book *Earthmind*, write, "For a long time now, we have been unable to remember our former closeness with the Earth. Due to this amnesia, the ecological problems now thrust upon us have come as a shock. . . . We notice the emergence of an amnesia that is really a double forgetting, wherein a culture forgets, and then forgets that it has forgotten how to live in harmony with the planet."[5]

As an elaboration of the amnesia metaphor we might consider the possibility of a *"traumatic amnesia."* We know from studies of the effects of child abuse and rape, of combat, of accidents and natural disasters, that where the person experiencing the trauma is in a completely helpless position, the memory of the experience can be completely lost—even though physical effects on the body and symptoms, such as nightmares and panic attacks, may remain. Such buried memories can often be recovered with hypnosis or psychedelic psychotherapy. If this metaphor applies to humanity's amnesia of prior knowledge of our interdependent relatedness, then perhaps there was some event that in a terrifying way threatened our sense of belonging and harmony.

The psychoanalyst Immanuel Velikovsky, in his book *Mankind in Amnesia*, proposed a brilliant theory explaining such a trauma. He argued that planetary near-collisions in prehistoric times caused massive and violent earth changes, leading to almost total amnesia and permanent fear and insecurity among humans. Even if we do not accept his theory of cosmic catastrophe, there are plenty of candidates for extremely violent natural cataclysms, such as volcanic and seismic events, with widespread loss of life and forced migrations, during the last four to five thousand years, as well as earlier. In the fifteenth century B.C., for ex-

5. Paul Devereux, John Steele, and David Kubrin, *Earthmind* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 2–3.

ample, a volcanic eruption on the island of Thera in the eastern Mediterranean, accompanied by earthquakes and tidal waves, obliterated the highly advanced ancient Minoan culture—and may have provided the historical prototype for the legend of sunken Atlantis. Other possible events causing traumatic amnesia may have been periods of prolonged rain and freezing, prolonged drought and aridity, sudden weather changes, or invasions by marauding warrior-bands. In medieval Europe it is not difficult to imagine the traumatic effect of Christianity's prolonged onslaught on the pagan nature cults, as well as the Black Death, which wiped out one-third of the population in the fourteenth century. In Chellis Glendinning's view, as in Paul Shepard's, the original trauma leading to human separation from the rest of life was domestication, when "the human relationship to the natural world was gradually changed from one of respect for and participation in its elliptical wholeness, to one of detachment, management, control, and finally domination."[6]

The amnesia metaphor is more hopeful than some of the other models, since it is easier to remember something that we once knew than it is to develop an entirely new adaptation. We can also see that the indigenous peoples of the Fourth World, whether in North and South America, Southeast Asia, or Australia, have been trying for some time to help us remember certain vital attitudes and values that they have preserved and maintained in their own ways of life.

Theodore Roszak, in his book *The Voice of the Earth,* has argued that ecology and psychology need each other and that "repression of the ecological unconscious is the deepest root of the collusive madness in industrial society; open access to the ecological unconscious is the path to sanity."[7] Roszak points out that Jung's idea of the "collective unconscious" originally included prehuman animal and biological archetypes, but later came to concentrate primarily on panhuman religious symbols. He proposes that we take the original meaning and call it the "ecological unconscious" as "the living record of cosmic evolution." This may turn out to be a terminology that has a wide appeal, although I personally prefer Robert Jay Lifton's idea of a "species self." Calling some image or

6. Chellis Glendinning, *My Name Is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization* (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), pp. 70–71.
7. Theodore Roszak, *The Voice of the Earth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 320.

understanding "unconscious," or even more, reifying it as "the unconscious," may function to keep it unconscious. After all, we are trying to foster ecological *consciousness,* or "ecological conscience," to use Aldo Leopold's term.

Roszak wants to rehabilitate the Freudian *id:* instead of the predatory, lecherous beast of the founder of psychoanalysis, he sees it as the repository of ancient ecological wisdom. "The id [is] the Earth's ally in the preservation of the biosphere . . . [and] Gaia gains access to us through the door of the id." But I do not believe this idea will do what Roszak wants it to do. While it is true that our Western modern child-rearing practices effectively stifle any innate ecological sensibility the child may have, it is also true that in traditional societies ecological knowledge and respect for nature is passed on from parents and elders to children and without such training does not just emerge. This is one of the reasons why the disruption of traditional cultures has been so environmentally devastating. "Open access to the ecological unconscious," whatever that may mean, is not going to be sufficient for a path to sanity, unless supplemented by a recovery of ancient traditions of initiation and ritual celebration and a strong dose of ecological literacy.

In contrast to the Freudian and post-Freudian view of the centrality of repression in the creation of "the unconscious," there has been in recent years a revival of interest in the concept of *dissociation.* Dissociative disorders, such as "post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD) and "multiple personality disorder" (MPD), are being diagnosed much more frequently, though it is not known whether this is because of an increase in the actual occurrence of such disorders or because of improved recognition of conditions previously misunderstood. Dissociation is a normal and natural cognitive function, the opposite of association. Dissociation plays a role in hypnotic and other forms of trance, when we progressively disconnect perception of the external world in order to attend to interior images, memories, and impressions. Even the simple act of focusing or concentrating attention clearly involves some degree of dissociation.

In the Freudian view, psychic material (thoughts, images, feelings, etc.) that is in the repressed unconscious (also called *id)* is disorganized, primitive, and childish, functioning according to the "pleasure principle"; whereas the conscious mind (*ego)* functions according to the "real-

ity principle" and is capable of adjusting or adapting to the "demands" of reality in a rational, organized manner. The dissociationist view, as originally put forward by Freud's contemporary Pierre Janet and later in the neo-dissociationist theory of Ernest Hilgard and others, involves a "vertical" separation of strands of consciousness that may be equally well organized, rational, and in touch with reality. For example, the mental and emotional components of a painful experience may be dissociated, so that we remember what we saw and thought, but not what we (appropriately) felt; or conversely, a certain stimulus may trigger a feeling state of panic, but the cognitive memory of what happened remains dissociated. In multiple personality disorder, which has been shown in 99 percent of cases to have developed as a self-protective response to repeated sexual and physical abuse in early childhood, two or more fragments of identity, sometimes called "ego-states" or "alters," are created; these fragments maintain a continuity of their own, often with different names and different personality characteristics. As Hilgard says, "The concealed (or dissociated) personality is sometimes more normal or mentally healthy than the openly displayed one. This accords better with the idea of a split in the normal consciousness rather than with the idea of a primitive unconscious regulated largely by primary process thinking."[8]

The notion of "splitting" of two or more equally rational and organized psychic fragments or identities was also used by Robert Jay Lifton in his analysis of the Nazi doctors, who were able to enjoy listening to Beethoven in the garden and play with their children after a day of torturing and killing people. I believe that this concept of dissociation or splitting provides a more accurate and more useful understanding of the collective human pathology vis-à-vis the environment than the notion of a repressed and primitive "ecological unconscious." The entire culture of Western industrial society is dissociated from its ecological substratum. It is not that our knowledge and understanding of the Earth's complex and delicate web of interdependence is vaguely and inchoately lodged in some forgotten basement of our psyche. We have the knowledge of our impact on the environment, we can perceive the pollution and degradation of the land, the waters, the air—but we do not attend

8. Ernest Hilgard, *Divided Consciousness* (New York: John Wiley, 1986), p. 83.

to it, we do not connect that knowledge with other aspects of our total experience. Perhaps it would be more accurate, and fair, to say that individuals feel unable to respond to the natural world appropriately, because the political, economic, and educational institutions in which we are involved all have this dissociation built into them. Dissociative alienation has been a feature of Western culture for centuries or, in some respects, even for millennia, if Paul Shepard is right.

Elsewhere, I have argued that due to a complex variety of social and historical reasons, a core feature of the Euro-American psyche is a "dissociative split between spirit and nature."[9] We have a deeply ingrained belief that our spiritual life, our spiritual practices, must tend in a direction opposite to our nature. Spirit, we imagine, rises upward, into transcendent realms, whereas nature, which includes bodily sensations and feelings, draws us downward. In some versions of this core image, the contrast between the two realms is even sharper: spirit is not only separated from nature, but incompatible and opposed. The human spiritual is then always regarded as superior to the animal natural.

Paul Shepard calls this the "central dogma of the West" and traces it to the Christian desert fathers, who retreated to the desert the better to mortify the flesh and thus raise the spirit. (Susan Power Bratton on the other hand has argued that the desert fathers were the first ecologically conscious Christians.) Earlier foreshadowings of this idea can be found in the Hebrew Old Testament, in the following passage from Isaiah (55:8), for example: "My ways are not your ways, says the Lord; just as heaven and earth are apart, so are my thoughts separate from yours."

Whenever this dissociative split originated, clearly by the time of the Protestant reformation, the idea was firmly implanted in almost everybody's mind that we have to overcome our "lower" animal instincts and passions and conquer the body in order to be spiritual and attain "heaven" or "enlightenment." This image says that to enter into the city of God, the divine realms, you have to work against your nature; this was called the *opus contra naturam*. In the modern psychological, Freudian version of the ancient split, the conflict is between the human *ego* consciousness, which has to struggle against the unconscious body-based, animal *id*, in order to attain consciousness and truly human cul-

9. Ralph Metzner, "The Split between Spirit and Nature in European Consciousness," *The Trumpeter* 10, no. 1 (Winter, 1993).

ture. Our conflicted relationship with the natural, what Freud called *das Unbehagen in der Kultur,* the discontent of culture, was for him the price we had to pay for the possibility of civilization.

The similarity of the two formulations, the religious and the psychological, lies in this dualism: we could say that throughout the history of Western consciousness there has been a conception of two selves—a natural self, which is earthy and sensual, and tends downward, and a spiritual or mental self, which is airy and ethereal, and tends upward. Perhaps its most vivid formulation is by the eighteenth-century German poet-philosopher Goethe, who formulated this core dualistic image in a famous passage in his drama *Faust.* "Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast, and one is striving to be separate from the other." One "holds to the world, with sensual, passionate desire"; the other "rises from earthly mist to the ethereal realms." The story of Faust, with his restless and ruthless quest for knowledge as personal power, strikes us as somehow a mythic key to the European psyche.

The ecologically disastrous consequences of this dissociative split in Western humans' identity become clear when we reflect upon the fact that if we feel ourselves mentally and spiritually separate from our own nature (body, instincts, sensations, and so on), then this separation will also be projected outward, so that we think of ourselves as separate from the great realm of nature, the Earth, all around us. If we believe that in order to advance spiritually we have to go against, to inhibit and control, the natural feelings and impulses of our own body, then this same kind of antagonism and control will also be projected outward, supporting the well-known Western "conquest of nature" ideology. For most people in the West, their highest values, their noblest ideals, their image of themselves as spiritual beings striving to be good and come closer to God, have been deeply associated with a sense of having to overcome and separate from nature.

It does not take much imagination to see how the consequences of this distorted perception have been played out in the spread of European civilization around the globe. And it *is* a distorted, counter-factual image: we human beings are not, in fact, separate from or superior to nature, nor do we have the right to dominate and exploit nature beyond what is necessary for our immediate needs. We are part of nature; we are *in* the Earth, not on it. We are like the cells in the body of the vast living

organism that is planet Earth. An organism cannot continue to function healthily if one group of cells decides to dominate and cannibalize the other energy systems of the body.

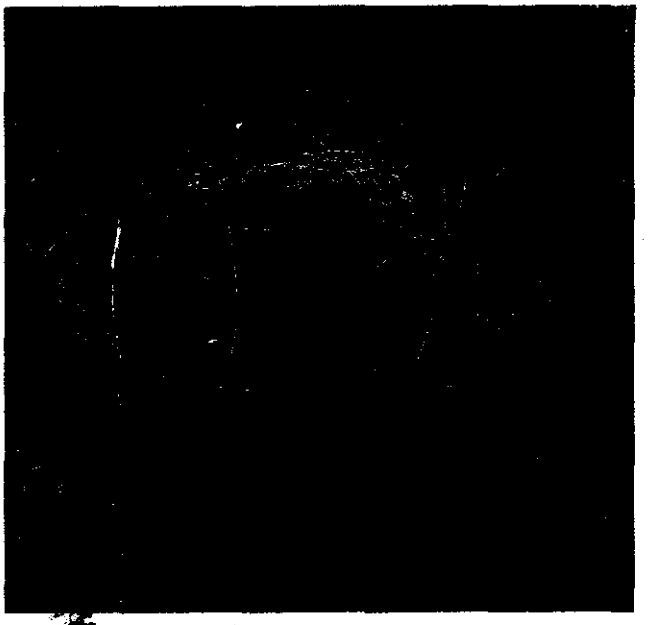
Furthermore, the idea that the spiritual and the natural are opposed or that spirituality must always transcend nature is a culturally relative concept not shared by non-monotheistic religions or traditional societies. In indigenous cultures around the world the natural world is regarded as the realm of spirit and the sacred; the natural *is* the spiritual. From this follows an attitude of respect, a desire to maintain a balanced relationship, and an instinctive understanding of the need to consider future generations and the future health of the ecosystem—in short, sustainability. Recognizing and respecting worldviews and spiritual practices different from our own is perhaps the best antidote to the West's fixation on the life-destroying dissociation between spirit and nature.

"A VERY EXCITING BOOK *of enormous interest for everyone concerned with the future of our species—environmentalists and legislators, industrialists and educators, you and me. Its message should become part of Western thought.*" —JANE GOODALL

Ecopsychology

RESTORING THE EARTH

HEALING THE MIND



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The Sierra Club, founded in 1892 by John Muir, has devoted itself to the study and protection of the earth's scenic and ecological resources—mountains, wetlands, woodlands, wild shores and rivers, deserts and plains. The publishing program of the Sierra Club offers books to the public as a nonprofit educational service in the hope that they may enlarge the public's understanding of the Club's basic concerns. The point of view expressed in each book, however, does not necessarily represent that of the Club. The Sierra Club has some sixty chapters coast to coast, in Canada, Hawaii, and Alaska. For information about how you may participate in its programs to preserve wilderness and the quality of life, please address inquiries to Sierra Club, 730 Polk Street, San Francisco, CA 94109.

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