

The Pennsylvania Wild (While social distancing)

In some ways I am reluctant to say much about what we are doing to stay sane (and healthy) in this extremely crazy time of the virus. It is like going back to San Francisco after you've struck gold in 1849 and telling the populace of your good luck. However, considering what we are faced with as a nation and as a people, I think I better fess up.

OK ...for most of my life, probably from my young teenage years, I've realized that walking in the woods (sometimes just for hours and sometimes for days) helped and even cured a lot of things that I had been worried about. Suffice it to say that I've been practicing social distancing for approximately 64 years. Ask my wife. That is not an exaggeration.

I do it once almost every day and my other half and I do it several times a week usually. We do it on local trails and in local forests with or without trails. We do it to find wild flowers and water falls and just to do it. I do it in rain and snow, in warm and cold, and early rather than late as a forester. I love to do it in a fresh snow as it becomes a book of all the creatures (including me) that are moving through it. Just these past few weeks in probably the last fresh snow on a cold morning, I saw a ball of fur seemingly moving in the air just up the hill from me. When I got to where it was I realized it was a coyote that had been coming right at me on a dead run. I could see the skid marks of about four feet when he first saw me and had then turned and run out at an acute angle away from me. I began following his back trail, still wondering

why he was traveling so fast towards me. I heard hounds in the distance and then hounds coming right past me, ignoring me as they chased the coyote and then several minutes later reversing themselves, coming back and heading out on the same angle the coyote had taken. It was a Roadrunner episode!

Several months ago I was hunting in an obscure place on the West Rim of the Canyon. I admit, I call it hunting, really it is hiking with a gun or a bow or a cross bow. I sneak along trails, and to be quite honest, it is “social distancing.” I never called it that before this national crisis we find ourselves in now, but that is essentially what it is. It is to be alone and quiet, apart from others. Hunting is just one of my excuses (I should say one of my many excuses). I escaped church for many years as a kid by running a trap line. My mom knew I had to check those traps. In those trapping days, I tended to do it where there weren’t people. Really, it was “social distancing.”

Back to hiking on the West Rim: I found something which was pretty interesting and was unsure whether it was natural or perhaps ancient man’s design. I sent a picture of it off to the Anthropology and Geology Departments at PSU and got this back: “most likely a trace fossil of a burrowing sea creature.” An “arthophycus from Silurian sandstones some 420 to 440 million years ago that underlie many of our ridges in northcentral Pa.”

We live in an extraordinary area with many miles of trails, canyons, mountains, streams, and forests. There are many ways to utilize this bounty. Whether you are a hiker, biker, hunter, fisherman, runner, walker, crawler, drawer, photographer, or even rider, it is there...that great wilderness.

I realize, up to this point, I've treated our present situation rather lightly in this writing. I do get it and have thought about it a lot. I've been comparing it to other experiences in my life and the life of everyone who is alive today here. I spent two years in the Asian jungles of the 60's as a Peace Corps Forester among Aborigines, Malays, Chinese, Indians, Gurkhas, and guns. I did basically sneak into South Vietnam during that time, and did hitch rides on Air America (C.I.A.) flights all around the Delta, and did see the war upfront rather brutally. That was, thinking back about it, pretty scary...and crazy. At the time I was bullet-proof (in my own mind)...but that was a personal experience.

When I came back to the U.S., I found that many Americans were not nearly as affected by it as I was. Many were able to isolate themselves from what our troops and the Vietnamese were experiencing.

This situation now is different. The virus is affecting everyone even if we wish it were not. Aside from it being very scary for Americans, I believe it is already hard for many members of our society to deal with just living on a daily basis.

That brings me back to the walking in the woods part.

IT WORKS!