



Big Feet, Light Steps

This is the final story from the 'Summer Suite' - a collection of stories written during the summer of 1994, when our family spent a month staying at the home of my late father-in-law, in a small village in Mie Prefecture.

I spent an hour or so the other evening sitting in the dark on the river bank, listening to the night sounds. I heard a car pull up at the nearby bridge, and then a short time later, two men came into view, wading in the shallow water. They were easy to see, because one of them carried a large flashlight, and the other had a lamp mounted on his head, to illuminate wherever he was looking. They also carried spears, trident-tipped rubber-propelled spears. Night fishermen.

They were making plenty of noise, so I didn't think they had much chance of catching anything, but I was afraid that they might stumble across the hiding place of the golden coloured carp who lives in a certain deep place under the banks just over there, or that large stone sitting in the centre of the sandy area, where this afternoon I disturbed a huge fat crab, or that shoal in mid-stream where a thick crowd of fingerlings was rising for insects just a short time before. But they didn't even have the patience for something that easy. After about five minutes of splashing around, they gave up, one saying to the other, "Aw forget it. There's nothing left in this river, anyway." A minute later, all was silent again.

I suppose to long-time residents of this village, that comment was pretty much true. "Nothing left in this river." They tell me that it used to be full of life; ayu, eels, crabs, river shrimp, and more. And those are only the edible species, the ones everybody notices. With the total disruption of the river's ecology brought about by our intrusions, I am sure that many microscopic-level species have also disappeared.

I really have to confess to mixed feelings about our impact on this planet. How much is natural? How much is perverse? If I walk down the street and crush some ants, I don't feel that I have done anything 'wrong'. I have big feet, they are very small. As a consequence, they are very numerous. That is the nature of things. If however, I were to walk along watching carefully, and tried to stomp on as many as I could, that would be different, wouldn't it? Instead of a 'normal' balance between our two species, I have now shifted things. My new attitude says in effect, "I want to destroy you. Instead of sharing this living space together, I want it all for myself."

Now you're laughing. "Who cares about ants? There are zillions of them. As a species, they'll probably out-live human beings!" Well, maybe so, but it's not the ants I'm worried about, it's our attitude. We can either live together with the other inhabitants of this earth, or we can destroy everything.

But those two fishermen. Were they really doing anything wrong? They were simply looking for food, and in an honest way, hunting for themselves, the things they intended to eat. They are certainly more honest than I am. Where did the fish come from that I ate last week? Probably a devastated over-fished eco-system out in the ocean somewhere. Me? I just 'close my eyes' and eat.

But now, there's nothing left in the river. Me, and those fishermen, and the rest of you too, obviously have to rethink our attitudes. Behaviour patterns that worked just fine when humans were far less numerous than

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now, have to be changed. The bottomless, endless, 'natural' supermarket in which we once lived is closing down. Time is running out, and we must now change our ways.

I have just finished reading the book, "The Diversity of Life", by Edward O. Wilson, noted biologist and writer. It is a very interesting and eye-opening description of just how much more vast this 'sea of life' on earth is than most of us realize, and also of the astonishing rate at which this diversity is now being lost, mostly due to human activity. His conservative (!) estimate is that species are now being lost at the rate of about 27,000 per year ... 74 per day ... or about 3 per hour. Extinct. Lost forever. "Let's go home. Nothing left in this river, anyway ..."

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