

THE VISITOR ¹

The waves beat upon the shore,
one after another.
They will continue to do so,
Long after I have departed.

If you want to know what we are like to wilderness, find an old country road with a long stretch of straightaway where the road traverses through some woods. If no woods are available, a large area of farmland will suffice. Place your chair safely along side of the road. Listen to the sounds. The sounds which you hear are the natural sounds of the woods surrounding you. You might hear some of the following sounds, the rustling of the trees behind you as the soft wind combs its way through the branches of the trees, the endless gurgling of a small stream as the water flows over and around the small rocks in it, and birds flying in and out of the woods in their daily search for food. You might hear the ebb and flow of nature in a cacophony of natural sounds.

As you sit there comfortably on your chair, a car will eventually drive by the spot. As it approaches the place where you are sitting, its sounds are different from the ones that you hear behind you. When you first hear it, the rumbling of the car is faint and not much of an intrusion upon the landscape. As it approaches, its sounds becomes louder and more dominate. The closer it gets to your chair, the noise of its engine, the hum of its tires against the road, and the ruby throated roar of its exhaust begin to overshadow the more natural sounds of the woods surrounding you. As the car passes, its chatter is all that you can hear. Even the noise of the radio blaring inside the car is heard. In fact, the sound of the car may totally drown out the natural sounds of the woods around you. But just as it came, it goes. The car is but a brief moment in the background music of the woods behind you. As it travels down the road, its sounds again become less dominate upon the landscape. The natural sounds of the wind passing through the trees, the small brook behind you and the other natural sounds of the woods once again become the prevalent sounds upon the landscape. To the woods around you, the car traveling down the road is ephemeral and but a brief intrusion upon the natural sounds surrounding you. These are the continuous sounds, the ones which are always there. They are the ones which will exist long after the car departs. The car came and it went. It was a brief visitor to this landscape alongside this country road.

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How do you know when you are in the wilderness? A simple test is to listen to the background noises. Simply close your eyes and listen to the cacophony of sounds. If the hum of the background is man-made, the setting is most likely urban. If the hum of the background is mostly natural, the setting is most likely natural. For the purposes of this experiment try to blot out the noises in the foreground. In an urban environment, these noises may include the car traveling down your street, the air conditioner compressor which runs at the side of your house or the roar of the lawnmower cutting the grass in the yard across the street. Block out these noises and listen to the noises in the background. In most urban areas, the hum of the background noises are man-made. Usually, they result from human commerce and traffic moving along the nearby streets and highways. This constant traffic creates most of this low level background noise, a steady and constant hum which is present in the background.

In contrast, if the hum of the background is mostly natural, the setting is most likely the natural environment. In a similar way, listen to the background noises in a wilderness. They are all natural. Depending on where you are, you might hear the lapping of the water along the shore or the continuous breaking of waves on the beach. On the other hand, the background noise might simply result from the stillness of the lake and the night air, broken only by an intermittent jumping of fish to obtain their next meal. Even so, their jumping creates an asymmetrical rhythm amongst the other natural sounds with their periodic and seemingly random reentry splashes.

The test is straightforward. Close your eyes and open your ears to the background noise. If they are predominately man-made, you are in an urban environment. If they are predominately natural, you are in the more natural environment of wilderness. There are exceptions to this simple test. However, it provides a relatively simple method with which to determine where you are.

To the wilderness, our backcountry canoe trip to the Everglades was like the car on the country road. The wilderness hears the entry of our paddles in the water as we approach. It hears the gurgling created by the bows of the canoes cutting their way through the water. It feels the subtle wakes made by the canoes upon its shores. Much like the radio blaring in the car, it hears the loud chatter and the occasional roar of laughter amongst the members in the group. To the wilderness, our trip comes and then it goes. It is ephemeral and transitory. It is but a brief moment in a long day. Then it goes back to listening to its sounds which once again dominate the landscape.

To the wilderness, our sounds are but a brief intrusion in the cacophony of its sounds. There is harmony amongst all of the sounds in the wilderness and they are all natural sounds. To the wilderness, our trip is a visitor. Like a visitor, we are just passing through. And conversely, when our sounds begin to dominate the wilderness and when our sounds become those of the background too, the wilderness is no longer wilderness and we are no longer a visitor.