

Escudilla— Free to Be Wild

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Wilderness--illusive yet ubiquitous. Less than 5 miles-- as the proverbial crow flies --from my mountain retreat lays Escudilla Peak and the Escudilla Wilderness. Often I take it for granted. From its slopes flows the sweet water that fills my well. On the mountaintop stands the fire tower that alerts the helicopters to drop flame retardants on fires that threaten the tiny community of Nutrioso.

Escudilla stands as a defining force behind the community. Long before the mountain gained wilderness status, the locals revered it. "Many climb its summit seeking solace, rejuvenation of soul, and a time to mingle with nature at its best. The contour of the mountain is as familiar to natives as the breakfast table; a landmark of home and pristine beauty. There is no wonder the Indians felt it was sacred and worshiped there. Many folks still do" (Kelly and Lee, p. 23).

Some claim that the Indians spared Nutrioso from raids endured by neighboring communities because of the spirits of the mountain. An old Indian legend tells of spirits warning Apaches not to cross the mountain to make war on neighboring peaceful tribes. When they ignored the warning, "the Great Spirit's hand reached forth and turned them to stone. He took their hearts, and after draining the blood into the lake, formed them into the heart-shaped mountain that stands today as a warning to the Apache Indians" (Kelly & Lee, p. 12).

Aldo Leopold learned to *Think like a Mountain* as he watched the "fierce green fire dying" in the eyes of a wolf on the slopes of Escudilla. For him, like many before, Escudilla dominated the landscape.

Life in Arizona was bounded under foot of gramma grass, overhead by the sky, and on the horizon by



Escudilla.

To the north of the mountain you rode on honey-colored plains. Look up anywhere, any time, and you saw Escudilla.

To the east you rode over a confusion of wooded mesas. Each hollow seemed its own small world, soaked in sun, fragrant with juniper, and cozy with the chatter of pinon jays. But top out on a ridge and you at once became a speck into an immensity. On its edge hung Escudilla.

To the south lay the tangled canyons of Blue River, full of whitetails, wild turkeys, and wilder cattle. When you missed a saucy buck waving his goodbye over the skyline, and looked down your sights and wondered why, you looked at Escudilla (Leopold, 1966, p. 141).

The last grizzly in Arizona called Escudilla its home. "Old Bigfoot crawled out of his hibernation den in the rock slides and, descending the mountain [Escudilla],

bashed in the head of a cow. Eating his fill, he climbed back to his crags and there summered peaceably on marmots, conies, berries, and roots." (Leopold, 1966, p. 143). "Bigfoot claimed for his own only a cow a year, and a few square miles of useless rocks, but his personality pervaded the country." Nearly 75 years ago, a government trapper took a month to rid the mountain of this "destructive animal in need of slaying." While the bears demise left a void for Leopold, his words leave us with a memory of a mountain and a bear...symbols

of all that is wild about us.



Congress created the 5200-acre wilderness in 1984—long after the passing of the wolf and the grizzly. With wilderness

designation, the mountain stands not only with undeniable force geographically but holds the right to nurture all that is wild. In terms of square miles, the Escudilla Wilderness is small--one of the smallest. But, symbolically, Escudilla is a giant.

Before I write this, I jump in my old Honda Accord with over 200,000 miles on it. The Honda easily accesses the trailhead that leads up the mountain. As I weave up the dirt road—quite smooth in comparison to other trips--I



feel tensions ease and anticipation grow. I am never prepared—especially in the fall when the colors erupt. I round a corner only to gasp—my attention is completely diverted to the orange and yellow aspen on the slope—the by-produce of a fierce 1953 fire. With attention diverted, the Honda fishtails just a bit on the curve, pulling me back to the task at hand. From here on, it is anticipation.

Only glimpses of the mountain slip through the trees. I take the Terry Flat loop so that I will be able to see Escudilla in all of its glory before I start my walk up the trail. The road becomes rocky after the junction to the trailhead---but not impassible. I keep looking out of the window—hoping the sun will come from behind the clouds and illuminate the peak. I stop repeatedly and take pictures. The mountain is glorious as expected this time of year.

After stopping to gaze at the mountain, I ponder wilderness. When I climb back

into my car, I start to fasten my seatbelt but can't. The restraint almost seems to pull me back from the draw of the mountain. I pass the spot in the road where I photographed a Mexican wolf track one December as part of the Sky Island

Tracking workshop activities. I ponder wilderness. Some parts of wildness do return to the mountain.

I know I will not hike to the top today. It is late afternoon and I am alone. This is a wilderness—though the old grizzly does not roam the trails. I hear the snap of a branch. I stop and listen--alert to

all sounds. Nothing. I move on conscious of the amount of noise I make. I soften my steps in an effort not to disrupt the stillness around me. Nothing. Another sound breaks the quiet...maybe only a squirrel dropping pine cones—or was it something else? Without the grizzly, my heart remains quiet instead of pounding. I am not straining to see behind each tree.

I walk on—hoping the sun will slip from the clouds and turn the glimmering aspen into flaming yellow and orange. I turn back--barely up the trail but entranced by the silence and awed by the very essence of the mountain. I walk back very slowly and as quietly as I can---so aware that I am the noise in the woods. I am rewarded by the bugling of elk in the meadows of Terry Flat below. The chirp of a bird. Again—the snap of a twig.

I work my way back to the road. Not far. I have not walked more than ¼ mile. But I have changed. The simple experience

of crossing the wilderness line changes me. I hike in the national forest nearly every morning—but I am not transformed as I am when I cross the line into the wilderness. The wilderness is sacred. Wilderness is protected from the whims of political parties and the craziness of our commercial society.

I cross the wilderness line and I leave the world that is free to become wilder. The old grizzly will never be back—the range is too small for him no matter how trivial his needs. The native elk will never graze here again but their cousins do. Perhaps one day a pack of Mexican wolves will break the silence of the mountain with their howls. Wilderness offers hope that the forces of nature will welcome and nurture our efforts to correct the extermination and destruction perpetuated by our species.

I study the Aspen by the trail—marked by the initials of previous hikers. At first I am offended by their ignorance—then comforted to know that others have come here—and even if they did not feel the spirit I do, they left their mark. Maybe in that process of carving their initials, they connected with the spirit of the mountain and will someday in a small way help to protect places like this. Now I smile to myself as I look at the marking from the bears. The claws of the bear are ever so much more elegant than the clumsy marking of the hikers--each claiming territory in its own way.

I leave. I return to my car. I drive back to my property that I am so fortunate to have. But 20 acres bordering the National Forest is not a wilderness. My neighbors cut their 30 acres pastures. I

feel depressed as I return to a beauty framed by people's need to control. I pull out the lawn mower and cut grass---natural gramma of Leopold's essays. I tell myself it this ritual is to reduce fire danger. The Three Forks fire seriously threatened our little community not long ago. But in my heart I know that fire protection was only the initial impetuous for the lawn mower. Now we cut an acre with our lawn



mower because we think it is neater--more orderly--controlled. I am depressed.

Soft breezes begin their flow down the mountain as the cool air on Escudilla sinks to the lower lands—from nearly 11,000 feet at the top of the mountain to the 8,000 where my home lies. The Hulsey Bench, which raises just above my property line, bridging two worlds, which it borders—the beginning of an orderly

community and the protected evolution of a wilderness area. Tonight the cold air will drift down the mountain, flow down Hulsey Creek and into the little valley where I live. Escudilla will blanket the lawn I mowed with its brisk wilderness flow and I will know that the call of the wilderness is by far more powerful than my feeble attempt to create order. This canyon breeze fills me with hope as I drift off to sleep.



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