

A Tree Grows in Manhattan

Under all that concrete lurks a new wilderness.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

If you love the wilderness, Steady Eddy was saying, it's easy to get depressed when you see what's happening to the wilderness these days.

Colorado is being condo-ized. The Tongass rain forest in Alaska is being cut down and shipped to Japan. And astronauts say that the only sign of man on earth you can see from space is the smoke from the forest fires in the Amazon.

You can make your own list: Barges of garbage. Overflowing landfills. Pristine beaches polluted with everything from medical wastes to Exxon oil spills.

"Not to mention," Steady points out, "the tar-coated bodies of all those critters that get caught in the spilled crude oil."

Of course, it's not just the oil companies who are responsible for the polluted beaches and the polluted air. It's all of us, the Indian says. All of us who drive a car or a truck or a snowmobile or an ATV or anything with a motor hanging on it.

"All of us who do that," the Indian says, "should have to do that with the body of a dead, tar-coated critter next to us. Then we could focus on the question: Is what we're doing with this vehicle worth what we're doing to this critter?"

"It'd be like getting hit in the head with a two-by-four," Steady marveled.

If you love the wilderness, it's easy to get depressed just thinking of men swarming through it with their technology.

"Now you know," the Indian said, "how our old grandfathers and grandmothers felt."

Well. You start thinking this way in the middle of February, Steady Eddy says, and you may never see March.

Every time I start thinking that way, I remember that magnificent tribal elder, Calvin Rutstrum, the north woods philosopher and outdoorsman who died a few years back at age 86. His obituary noted that he "stayed close to the wilderness, writing mostly at his cabin on Cloud Bay, Ontario, near Pigeon River. He made frequent, extensive journeys into the Canadian wilderness by canoe, dogsleds and snowshoes."

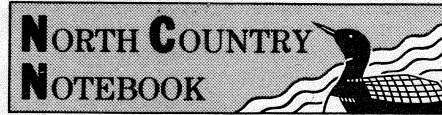
I love reading Calvin Rutstrum because the 15 books that he wrote are full of north woods lore.

But I never realized what a genius he was until I read his account of visiting New York City. You talk about depression. Most people who love the wilderness get very depressed when they have to visit New York City. Everything you see from the plane for miles and miles is manmade. Concrete. Concrete. Concrete. Steel. Glass.

When Calvin Rutstrum flew into New York City, he became positively elated by what he saw. Yes, everything he saw from the airplane for miles and miles was manmade. He saw concrete. Concrete. Concrete. Steel. Glass. There had been a big battle for the wilderness here, and civilization had "won." So why was Calvin elated? Because, he said, *everything* he saw—the concrete, the steel, the glass, the sprawling manmade creation they call New York City—everything was all potential wilderness!

When I first read that, I thought old Calvin had spent too much time with a tight tump line across his forehead, putting some of his essential hemispheres in a bind, so to speak. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that Calvin was on to something.

Think about a street that's not used for a month. Or a sidewalk. Or an abandoned airport runway. Weeds start poking through. Little green spears reaching for the light. Give them



enough time and they turn the concrete to pieces, the pieces to crumbs, the crumbs to dust and the dust to soil. It's an old, old story. Civilizations, Carl Sandburg the poet wrote, "go down to the rubbish heaps." Ma Nature, Steady Eddy the ballplayer observed, "bats last."

Our "conquest" of nature, Calvin Rutstrum went on, is an illusion. We put up the dams. We put up the bridges. We put up the skyscrapers. We put them all up and say that we have conquered nature. But it is an illusion. The conquest is predicated on maintenance.

We put up the Golden Gate Bridge, Calvin says, which the "conquerors" are quick to tell us is one of the great engineering miracles of all time, and that's true.

But what they are not so quick to tell us, Calvin notes, is that once the bridge opened and the ribbon-cutting ceremonies were over and thousands of people crossed the bridge on foot and in cars, workmen were on the bridge, chipping and scraping the rust and repainting the bridge. They immediately began doing *maintenance*, and generations of workers have been doing it ever since in a cycle without end. The truth is that if they didn't do maintenance, the bridge would rust and flake and weaken and inevitably fall.

"To have your worst fears confirmed like that," Steady Eddy says, "is somehow very comforting."

"You keep talking like that," the Indian said, "and you're walking in my moccasins." ■

George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Sunday nights at 10 on Wisconsin Public Radio, WERN (88.7 FM).