

Snow and goose feathers

The revolutionary power of creative expression

The usual terms of discourse about the environment, as set by industry and government, require coolly rational, scientific language. Such discourse may often be useful. But impartial, detached words can't deal with the deep emotional and intuitive knowledge of nature's value, and they may not offer the most effective means of encouraging the fundamental reorientation of attitudes and practices that is apparently needed if we are to reverse our environmental abuses.

Feminist writer Charlotte Bunch has said that creative writing can present different versions of reality, and can thereby nurture the practice of thinking for oneself, going against social norms, and conceiving of social alternatives, all of which are necessary for political action for social change. Others have observed more generally the revolutionary power of creative expression, pointing to its emphasis on the act of dislocating one's old ideas and allowing them to recombine in new ways.

This capacity for encouraging new ways of seeing and understanding gives the arts an enormous potential for spurring the needed cultural paradigm shift in our perception and treatment of nature.

Artistic expression has the power to show us the cultural assumptions made about nature as a machine, and it can make us feel and know the spirit and value of nature in a way that conventional prose cannot. Perhaps it is only through creative "revisioning" of nature that we will gain the humility to see wildlife and trees and water, not as ours to dominate, but as intrinsically valuable. And because illumination through the creative process can happen suddenly, unexpectedly and dramatically, the arts may help us to establish a new approach to the environment in time to reverse the changes in atmospheric chemistry so that the ozone layer may heal, in time to save the last of the old growth forests, and protect the remnants of environmentally respectful culture.

In this issue of *Alternatives*, artists take traditional views of nature as a collection of meaningless objects or commodities, and invert them. The new energy minister in Ontario's NDP government discusses Wordsworthian environmental philosophy. And we find the hottest act this side of Bali involves two people dressed up as fishes of the world. There are contri-

butions about community theatre, poetry of women and wilderness, Mennonite folk painting, and art made of snow and goose feathers.

Our intent has been to suggest ways in which creative dialogue can work with conventional discourse for environmental advocacy. In our call for papers we hoped to attract submissions reflecting on how creativity can reaffirm in us our deep affinity with nature and engender a more profound commitment to its preservation. We sought artists' views on creativity as a way of overcoming dualistic, patriarchal thinking about nature. And we were rewarded with an extremely diverse response—children's plays, accounts from sociologists and tree planters, and a computer-generated visual poem. Correspondence came in from across North America and as far away as Kenya.

Would that we could have included far more.

The editors dedicate this issue to the memory of Bill Mason, Canadian filmmaker extraordinaire, landscape painter, and passionate lover of that most reverential form of wilderness travel, the canoe. Bill was so much enraptured with wilderness and with the merging of spirit with wild water in skilful paddling, that he spent virtually his whole life trying to communicate this passion through creative media. We hope that others will continue his work.

Our thanks also to Professor John Wadland for his considerable labours on this issue. It could not have come together without his insight, advice and footwork.

In *The Hidden Mountain*, Gabrielle Roy wrote that an artist cannot ever fully capture the spirit of nature in art, but can come close, and most forever try. May there be many more who work their creative skills to such magic, and educate the rest of us along the way. □

Anne Champagne