With so many returning to nature, little nature is left

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Nancy Ohanian / Graphic Impressions

This is the season for getting back to nature. Thousands flee the fatigue and the heat of urban life for the woodlands, the lakes or the shore with thoughts of renewal pulsating in their souls. Millions more seek out surrogate back-to-nature sensations by escaping, if but for the moment, to the romantic world of cinematic adventures, such as those portrayed in the "Crocodile Dundee" movies.

As a sometimes enthusiastic participant in this great American movement of recreational or cinematic adventure, I have relunctantly concluded that much of it these days is just plain bunk.

The story-line of the scenario is well illustrated by the Dundee films. Mick Dundee is an Australian Daniel Boone who lives in the wilds, communes with nature, knows the intimate habits of the crocodiles and can triumph over them, hand to tooth. His sixth sense, nurtured by his aboriginal upbringing in the wilderness, makes him more than a match for even the most street-smart denizens of the Big Apple or the most powerful of Colombian cocaine-lords. No wonder that a doubting, urbane New York news reporter — a quite different kind of Jane — finds Mick and his natural acumen irresistible.

The back-to-nature theme is deeply rooted in our cultural history. Think of Henry David Thoreau's mythical image of himself in "Walden": one who forsakes the evils of civilization and social intercourse to return to the salvific vitalities and healing solitudes of nature. Or recall Ernest Hemingway's heroic picture of that old fisherman who proclaims his virile manhood to himself by triumphing over the great swordfish, in "The Old Man and the Sea."

But innocent and venerably rooted in our culture as it may be, the back-to-nature theme still has come to sound like a lot of bunk to me. My perspective has changed with firsthand experience.

On a recent vacation I joined the exodus from civilization and headed back to nature. I went to a favorite haunt of mine in the thinly populated rugged foothills east of the White Mountains.

During the heat of the day there's a refreshingly cool little dell you can retire to. Shaded by gracious birches, soothed by a stream, the dell affords a bed of soft groundpine on which the tired urbanite can recline and find solace and renewal.

Or, so I thought. When I arrived this summer, everything was different. A nearby country road, which had hitherto been so full of potholes and treacherous turns that few drivers had ever been attracted to it, had been widened and straightened into a high-speed, broad-laned connector between two nearby state highways.

The road will now accommodate hundreds more worn-out urbanites fleeing civilization. But that lovely little dell is gone.

This private loss would not merit much attention were it not typical of the times. Boston-area affluence, with its shopping-mall sterilities, junk-food garbage, ski-lodge effluence, motorboat cacophony and ozone poisoning is spreading, like a backed-up sewer, into the foothills of the White Mountains.

Meanwhile, throughout the region, Americans' insatiable lust for energy — for a million gadgets, for wholly electrified, always-illuminated developments and for completely air-conditioned clubs and condominiums — is resulting in deadly sheets of acid rain.

These acid storms, maybe generated as far away as Ohio, pour down destruction on the forest and lakes of the White Mountain region. And who can trust any non-public source of drinking water in those parts anymore?

It is better, then, to put an end to all the back-to-nature business. The more we live with this lie, as if back-to-nature were a real possibility somewhere (Australia maybe?), the more we keep losing the real world of the woodlands and streams and foothills.

It is better face up to the truth: Unless we make a concerted effort to save those precious natural places, they all will fall prey to the ravages of our so-called civilization. Then all we'll have left will be the movies and the books.

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