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Open Space

"I hesitate to go back to places," George Schaller said, "because I'm afraid they will change."

Schaller, 73, is probably the most recognized biologist in the world. He studied mountain gorillas in Rwanda. He studied lions on the Serengeti, pandas in China, cheetahs in Iran and he studies antelope high in Tibet. Some of those animals might not be around without him.

He also has a perspective on wilderness that spans five decades. In tracking animals over desert sands and through dripping rainforests, he has walked in some of the world's great open spaces. He says Alaska has one of the best, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

He recently traveled to Alaska from his home in Connecticut to retrace a trip through ANWR he took under the wings of two legendary naturalists in 1956. In 2006, he carried along a few photos of the landscape he had snapped 50 years ago on the trip that resulted in the creation of the refuge. He came back through Fairbanks with these observations:

"On the Sheenjek (River), we climbed the same cliff I climbed in 1956, and looking out there was no difference—no roads, no buildings, no garbage dumps," he said. "The wonderful part was the timelessness of the landscape. I identified spruce trees that were the same, and an eagle's nest at a limestone cliff was still there."

Fifty years, no changes. Think of the town in which you grew up, and what it looks like today. I come up with two different images, and prefer the earlier. In the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and places like it, we not only have a place set aside to preserve animals, but also the landscape, and memories of both.

In wilderness, like we still have up here, we have a place that slows things down to a rhythm that's not manmade, where the sun is your clock and the wind filtering through tundra is your soundtrack. With 6 billion people and counting, maybe it's naïve to think we'll have this forever, but I'm sure glad we have it now.

I know these wild places are good for me, and I think maybe for other people, too. There's a freshening of the soul that comes from a silent landscape with no reminders of roads, cars, buildings, TV and the other infrastructure that keeps us going. We need places like this; places we haven't changed to make life more comfortable for Homo sapiens.

Schaller has known many nights of sleeping amid creepy-crawlies in jungles and shivering lightheaded through high-mountain passes. He is lithe, tanned and has a habit of listening more than he talks. His friends say he can hike all night without snacking. He

has been lucky to pursue his passions for most of his life, and they have taken him to many of the world's quiet places. After growing up in Berlin, Schaller's outdoor life began to blossom when he came to Fairbanks to attend the University of Alaska in the 1950s. Here, he learned from the masters, taking a wilderness trip to northeast Alaska in 1956 with biologists Olaus and Mardy Murie, who recommended the area be set aside as a wildlife refuge. For all his travels, he says this place is unique.

"I'm sure there are rain forests in Brazil where you can walk for a few days without seeing people or big changes to the landscape, but sites like (ANWR) that are ecologically whole are extremely rare."

I came here 20 years ago, drawn by the same country Schaller waxes about. The big open was a big part of the draw for someone from upstate New York, which has its own glory in distinct seasons, clear-running streams and hardwood forests. But it doesn't have that timelessness, or places where you could spend a month without seeing another human.

"It's nice to have a place that lets you feel like what it was like to live in the past, as if you're Lewis and Clark," Schaller said.

That Lewis and Clark part is important to me. I want that feeling of discovery I can't get on a trail where I'm standing to the side to let others pass. I want to at least have the illusion that I'm seeing the world as it was before us. And that's getting harder by the year. Someday the wilderness might be gone, and wouldn't that be a tragedy? Preserving it makes sense for us, and it also shows humility. "Animals and plants have a right to exist, too," Schaller said. "We don't have to destroy them for short-term goals."

The short-term goals Schaller talked about are drilling for a relatively small amount of oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which is contrary to the rules under which our leaders set it up in 1960.

I'm down with the other end of the argument, too—I have chosen to live in a state where the average yearly temperature is below freezing and I burn oil to keep my family warm. Our lifestyles require lots of oil, and we have to get it from somewhere.

But there has to be a way to preserve the wilderness character of this place, a place that people dream about because it's different from anywhere else in America. Schaller suggests we can have what we need to live and also taste the icing of wilderness. It takes one simple act—conserving fuel, a much more effective tactic than trying to find new sources.

"There are some areas like the arctic refuge that must be preserved," he said. "Everybody has a responsibility to think of future generations. If we don't, our grandchildren will see photo books of places like the Arctic refuge and will say 'What kind of people didn't preserve oil when they had the chance?'"

I don’t want that legacy. And even though most Alaskans vote for pro-development candidates because the money makes our lives easier, I don’t think any of us want to wake up someday and find out we live in Newark.

Maybe a guy who has traveled the wild places of the planet and who has accumulated a half-century perspective of landscapes all over the world has the right idea.

“Ultimately, our quality of life depends on a healthy environment, and for a healthy environment we need open space.”

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