



Lynn Schooler

The Blue Bear
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A Conversation with Lynn Schooler

Q: Your memoir, *The Blue Bear*, is framed up around the search on which you and a friend embarked on a journey to find and ultimately snap a picture of a rare animal known as a "blue bear." Why were you so determined to find that creature?

A: The 'Blue' or 'Glacier' bear is a rare variation of the American black bear, or *ursus americanus*, that is found only along a few hundred miles of extremely rugged coastline in Southeast Alaska. A study by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game estimated that there are probably no more than a hundred in the entire state, which is bigger than Texas, California, and Montana combined. My interest in the Blue Bear began as a desire to help my friend, who was a professional wildlife photographer. After years of searching and failing to find one, it became something of an obsession, probably because neither he nor I were the sort of people to ever give up once we decided to do something, but also because the act of seeking something so perpetually elusive began to take on something of a mystical or spiritual connotation. We both had a great fascination with the wilderness and it began to seem as if finding one would somehow define for us whatever quality it is that takes a place truly wild - a quality, which in this day and age is itself becoming increasingly difficult to find.

Q: Michio Hoshino was a legendary wildlife photographer. How did you meet him and how did he inspire you?

A: We met when I was hired by a Japanese broadcasting company to act as a guide for a documentary film that was being shot about Michio's life and work in Alaska. He was arguably the finest wildlife photographer the world has ever known and had a profound love for nature and the wilderness. But he also brought to his art an appreciation for humanity's place in the natural world that was in many respects unique in that field. He first came to Alaska when he was nineteen, drawn by a fascination with how people could live in an environment as harsh as the arctic, and his ideas about the natural world were formed largely by his experiences while living and traveling with Eskimos and Athabascan Indians. Working with him over the years, his views swayed me away from some of the radical, hard-line opinions I had adopted after the Exxon Valdez oil spill towards accepting humanity as an integral and workable part of the natural world.

Q: How did Michio die and how did his death affect you?

A: Michio was killed by a grizzly bear in 1996. There was a certain dark, poetic irony in someone so attuned to and in love with the natural world meeting his end in conflict with a member of a species he had done a great deal to preserve. For myself, his death came at a very difficult time - shortly after the death of my father and on the heels of several lesser, but still significant, personal troubles. I was overwhelmed, stunned and bitter until I went off for a long canoe trip up a glacier fjord and witnessed a series of predator-prey events that created a kind of numinous insight into the nature of life and death. It wasn't until I sat down to try to write the book (which started out as a simple record of our adventures) that I began to define the effect Michio had had on me, and understood how he had drawn me out of a somewhat suspicious and reclusive shell I had drawn around myself 20 years earlier, when a woman I was friends with was abducted and murdered by a serial killer.

Q: Did your relationship with Michio also inspire you to become a writer?

A: Yes, in a roundabout way. Michio was always very generous when it came to sharing his knowledge of photography and encouraging me to improve my own, but in Japan, he was also well known for his writing. We spent a lot of long, quiet evenings out in the field discussing ways to communicate images and ideas through words. I think seeing how much pleasure he took in finding just the right word or phrase made me want to try it.

Q: Does Michio's spirit live on with you today?

A: Michio was such an instinctively empathetic and unselfish person that it would be difficult for me to claim any part of his spirit or character as my own. But I am definitely a different (and I hope better) person for having known him. He trusted people and life in a way that was so bone-deep and profound that I don't think he was even aware of it, with the result that it became almost a spiritual quality. It was faith, really, a faith that other people could always be counted on to do their best, and that things work out the way they do for a reason. The effect of this was to inspire an outpouring of generosity and kindness in people from whom I, as a more cynical person, would have never expected it. So that's something I try to emulate, although not always with great success.

Q: You were born in Texas and suffered from adolescent scoliosis. How did that illness affect your youth and adulthood?

A: As a teenager, I spent two years strapped into a metal and leather contraption that made me look like Milton the Monster. Empathy isn't all that common in teenage society, so of course, being viewed as a freak meant I never fit in. At the time, it was very hard, but I think I learned some things early-on that otherwise I might not have - important lessons about self-reliance and about not believing the limitations others try to put on us. At the time, my doctor told me I would never lift over 35 pounds, never carry a pack again, and that later in life I would have so much pain that I would be disabled. None of that has proven true. We can simply refuse to accept limitations, especially those proposed by others.

Q: How did you and your family end up in Alaska?

A: The oil boom was in full swing in the late sixties and early seventies and even though our family had been in Texas for many generations, I think that financial incentive gave my father all the excuse he needed to pull up stakes and head out. But knowing my father, that was just a rationalization for doing what he really wanted to do, which was to take off on what at the time was considered an epic adventure.

Q: We all hear about global warming. In your opinion, are warmer temperatures evident in Alaska?

A: I'm no scientist, but it has certainly been my personal experience that the winters are not as severe as they were in the sixties and seventies. When I was a teenager, we endured weeks of temperatures as low as forty below, but last year, for the entire month of February, I never even put on a heavy coat. That may sound desirable, but in fact, warmer weather can cause some Alaskans major problems. Up north, in areas where there are no roads, people depend on frozen rivers and a good snow cover to make winter travel by snow machine possible. This isn't just a matter of recreation, either; if people can't travel to their hunting grounds, their families don't

eat. Last year the rivers around Dillingham didn't freeze until several months later than usual, and this created a very real threat to the well-being of some of the more remote villages.

Q: Ten years ago, the oil tanker Exxon Valdez struck a reef and spilled 12 million gallons of oil into the waters of Alaska, devastating the environment. How clean are the waterways today and are there still ramifications from the spill?

A: Prince William Sound looks clean now, but the real damage is very long term and deep. There are places there where an anchor still comes up with a sticky black gumbo on its flukes and beaches where a little probing with a stick will strike oil. No one really knows what the final effects of massive amounts of hydrocarbons in the ecosystem will be, but there are plenty of signs that something is terribly wrong. When the spill happened, the herring biomass in the Sound was at an all-time high. Two years later, something like a third of all the adult herring had ulcerous lesions on their bodies, some form of deformity, or signs of problems in their immune systems. Ten years later the herring stocks are at a historical low and there hasn't been a commercial harvest in eight or nine years. Between 1989 and 2001, the stocks fell almost 95 percent, from something like 113,000 tons to six thousand. Herring are right down there at the bottom of the food pyramid, feeding everything from the salmon and halibut to sea lions, eagles, orcas, and humpback whales, so it doesn't take a trained ecologist to see where this might lead. But the public has always been subjected to a lot of disinformation about the oil spill. I'll never forget being down in the Lower Forty-Eight the year after the oil spill and seeing a full page ad Exxon was running in the nation's newspapers, loudly proclaiming that the spill was all cleaned up, and that thanks to their noble efforts (and with a little help from Mother Nature) the fishermen were having a banner year. The fishermen were having a record catch all right, but what the ad neglected to mention was that salmon take anywhere from two to five years to mature in the wild before returning to their natal streams and that the year-class of fish they were bragging about had been spawned before the spill. I've heard it said that if O.J. Simpson had had Exxon's public relations department behind him, he'd probably be governor of California now.

Q: You derive a significant part of your annual salary escorting film crews, photographers, reporters, etc., through the fjords, forests, and glaciers of Alaska by boat. How are you playing a part in protecting the environment?

A: I'd like to think that by helping more people understand what an amazing treasure the American public has in Alaska, a larger part of them will get involved in the effort to help protect it. It's sad that so many people will never have the time or money to experience it firsthand, but sometimes I get to help someone else put out a beautiful image or film that captures it well, and sometimes that can really touch someone's heart if they can't be here themselves.

Q: How can all Americans save wildlife in Alaska today?

A: By caring. The purest form of patriotism is built upon caring for the place you come from, from caring about what is happening to the land and the water now and what will happen in the future. I know for many Americans Alaska seems so distant and remote that it doesn't feel like part of their country. But it is, and that means it belongs to them, not to the giant multi-national corporations that have been using and abusing it for the past 50 years. Most people are so busy that there is no room in their lives for activism, but everybody has time once in a while to sit down and write a letter or e-mail to their political representatives regarding an issue they care about, whether it is oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge or the administration encouraging more logging in roadless areas. And never, never, never buy any farm-raised salmon!

Q: Will you ever leave Alaska?

A: I'm no fortune teller, but right now I can't imagine what could ever convince me to leave. I travel a lot and readily acknowledge that the world is full of beautiful, remarkable places, but for me, this is home.

Q: Do you think you'll ever find the Blue Bear again?

A: Yes. The Blue Bear is still out there. And so am I.