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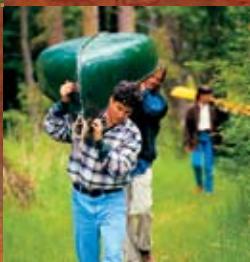
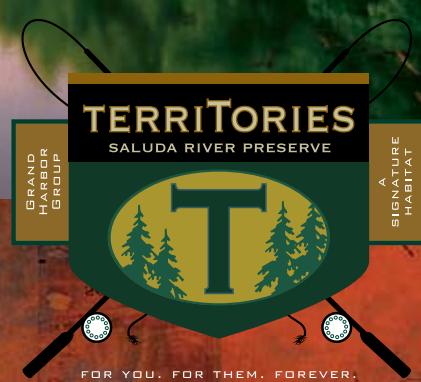
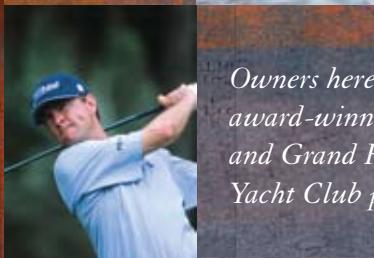
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Wild Heritage

By Todd Tanner



Here's a question worth pondering. What is it about hunting and fishing that make them so important in our lives? I'm not asking why we hunt and fish – that's a topic for another day – but what makes the physical act of casting a fly rod or stalking a big whitetail so different from all the other things we do on a regular basis?

Let me back up for a second and fill you in on the genesis of my question. Harry Briscoe and I are in the middle of a long conversation about global warming. Harry remains, if not skeptical, then unconvinced that people are causing climate change. I'm not. In my mind, the new evidence is too overwhelming, the scientists are too unified in their consensus, and the few remaining global warming deniers are too closely tied to the big oil companies for there to be any real doubt about what's going on. But I respect Harry, and I'm always willing to listen to what he has to say. Even when the cherry trees in our nation's

As hunters and fishermen we need to become leaders – to open humanity's eyes to the problems we face so our children can enjoy the same natural world we've enjoyed.



MIKE BARLOW

capitol start budding out in January.

My conversation with Harry has taken a fair number of twists and turns over the years and Harry's latest e-mail – about people who read a couple of global warming stories on the internet and then act like they're experts on the subject –

had me thinking about all the other ridiculous things we Americans do on a daily basis. We eat too much junk food. We drink too much alcohol. We smoke too many cigarettes. We teach our kids the Three Rs, but we don't bother to teach them how to think for themselves, or how to become creative problem solvers.

It's even worse when we look at the big picture. We pump our aquifers dry to irrigate our crops. We dump millions of tons of toxic chemicals into the air and water and then act surprised when our cancer rates go through the roof. We base our entire economy on the concept of "growth," when any reasonably bright twelve-year-old will tell

you that the idea of endless expansion in a finite physical space is ridiculous.

And that's the abbreviated list. You don't want to see the unabridged version.

So there I was, thinking about all the bizarre things we do here in the good old U.S. of A., and I started contrasting our "normal" behavior with our hunting and fishing. Because they just feel so different. It's almost like hunting and fishing are absolutely real when so much around us has become less so; as if our daily lives are filled with a fog that makes

the mundane seem important and the truly important seem unattainable.

Some of you might remember the term "ersatz," a word that folks back in the day used to describe coffee that wasn't made from coffee beans or chocolate that didn't have any connection with real chocolate. Well, in many ways that's what we have now. Ersatz lives, filled with TV, video games, spectator sports and all sorts of mind-numbing activities designed to while away the hours when we're not working as cogs in our nation's economic

machinery. It's crazy – truly crazy – but our connection to the natural world has become so tenuous that many of our neighbors can't even feel it any more.

Ten thousand years ago, though, when our distant ancestors were roaming the planet, life was different. You may have heard the famous Thomas Hobbes quote about primitive men living short, nasty, brutish lives. Well, Hobbes didn't know diddly. Your average Joe Caveman spent maybe twenty hours a week bringing home the . . . if not the bacon, then the bison or the venison or the elk steaks. Twenty hours a week putting food on the table and keeping everyone warm, dry and comfortable. Which left all sorts of time for family and friends, good conversation and storytelling, even music and culture. Amazing as it sounds, most tribal people enjoyed long and meaningful lives.

And that's what hit me the other day. The knowledge that the truly important things are the same things we share with our ancestors. Whether it's holding our child in our arms, or spending private time with our gal, or sitting around the fire at night with our buddies, or trying to put an arrow into a large herbivore, we're happiest when we're living in the real world. All that other junk – the TV, the computer, the video games, the cell phone, the Sunday afternoon football game, the 9 to 5 – is completely extraneous.

Go ahead. Tell me if I'm wrong.

Now there's only one problem with this particular realization. While it's great to get zapped by a lightning bolt that says, "You need to focus on the important stuff if you want to be truly happy.", that only gets us halfway home. We still have to figure out how to take a consumer-driven culture that prays at the alter of endless growth and get its feet back on the ground. Because that's ultimately what it's going to take, and I suspect you have the same nagging feeling in your gut

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that I have in mine. Namely, that a society of couch potatoes and video-game junkies doesn't have much of a future. Especially when we're treating some of our finest hunting and fishing grounds like garbage dumps and doing our level best to microwave Mother Nature.

Unfortunately, I don't have all the answers. We're not going back to living in tipis and caves, at least not voluntarily, and we sure as hell can't feed six billion people on venison backstraps and

quail breasts. But we obviously need to change.

Maybe the very first step is getting up out of our easy chair and taking our bird dog for a long walk. Or maybe it all starts by bringing our son on our next fishing trip or our daughter on our next deer hunt. Perhaps it's simply a matter of realizing that our greatest gift in life is *choice*, and that we can choose to walk a little closer to the earth, and to treat ourselves and everything around

us with just a bit more respect.

The one thing I know for sure is that as strange as it sounds, hunting and fishing are the key. Because sportsmen are the only ones left with that direct connection to a simpler, better time; we're the only ones left walking an unbroken lineage that stretches all the way back to our roots. And if we don't start talking about what's real and important in our lives, who's going to? The fellow plunking down twenty bucks on the next horse race? The guy with his butt on a bar stool? How about the young man who recently told my buddy, "You've got to play this new video game I just picked up. It's like fighting a lion with a knife."

I swear to God. "It's like fighting a lion with a knife."

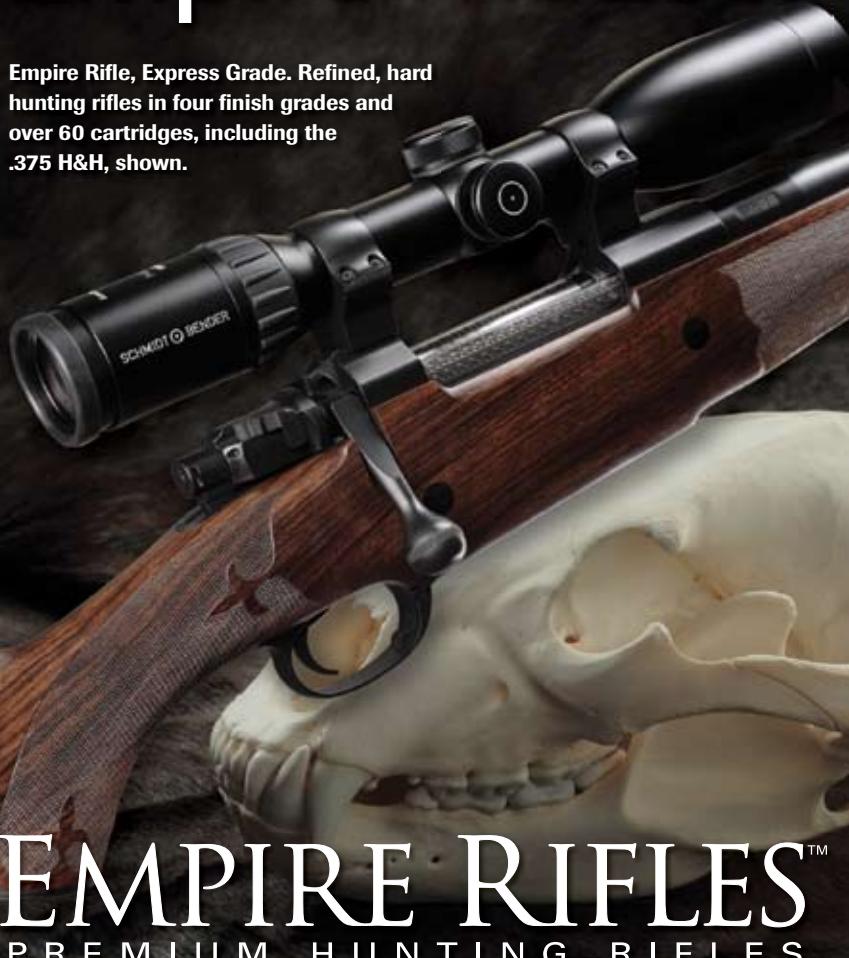
That's what we're up against, that kind of unbelievable disconnect between fantasy and reality, and it's our job to bring people back to their senses and reintroduce them to the sound of drumming grouse and the fresh scents of the forest.

So please don't hide the fact that you're a sportsman. Don't apologize for it. As strange as it sounds – and quite honestly, it sounds like a science fiction movie – we are the guardians of reality. If we're going to leave any kind of world behind for our children, we need to start focusing on the things that are truly important. We can't sit by while our civilization trashes our woods and waters; we can't allow our politicians and captains of industry to trade our resources for the illusory benefits of comfort and convenience.

In the end, it's pretty damn simple. We're hunters and fishermen. Nobody else has our direct connection to the land. If we can't open humanity's eyes to the problems we face, the whole damn planet is screwed. We need to start acting like leaders before it's too late.

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