A black outdoorsman takes a wilderness census, and finds it disturbingly light

By Eddy L. Harris

Night was falling all around the dusty mountains of south-eastern Utah. It was a warm, clear stretch of December, and I'd been fishing the Green River all day, fighting monster rainbows until both my arms were tired. By late afternoon I was exhausted and hungry but not at all ready to quit fishing, and I moved on to a small stream where the water was quieter and the trout were smaller and I was the only one.

When the sun went down, I was still fishing. I couldn't see well enough to tie on a new fly and had to thread tippet to eyelet with some eyes-closed mystical magic. But I wouldn't leave until the last lumen had been squeezed from the sky. Then I heard splashing in the stream behind me. It could have been deer coming down from the hills to drink, moving along in what to them is the safety of darkness—could have been anything not worth worrying over. But the splashing came instead from the wading boots of men. I froze there in the darkness, because there are times when men are more to be feared than grizzlies.

They were not villains, as it turned out, only fellow fishermen done for the day and noisily finding their way back to their car. But as I think back...
to that evening and many occasions like it, I realize what a complicated thing it is to be the only one. It's a sensation at once intensely pleasurable, to be alone on a stream at sunset, trout dancing at your feet, and at the same time daunting, for to be alone anywhere in the wilderness is to be really and truly alone.

On that evening, whether or not I was the only fisherman, I was certainly the only black person on that stream, in those mountains, in the great state of Utah. Surely this is an exaggeration, and yet through hyperbole I suddenly realize it has been on my mind now for many years, this peculiar fact that whenever I find myself in nature—camping beside a dry creekbed in Montana, cross-country skiing in northern Vermont, hiking a bit of the Appalachian Trail—mine is nearly always the only black face around.

This is something that other black outdoorsmen have been quietly puzzling over for years. My new friend Jean Ellis, for example, is an emergency room doctor from Billings, Montana. He's also an accomplished alpinist, and he's black. Ellis has attempted Everest and has climbed Cho Oyu in the Himalayas, distinguishing himself as the first black American to climb above 8,000 meters. "In 15 years," he says, "I've yet to meet another black climber in any country on any trip. And when I ask my other climbing friends how many blacks they've seen, they come up with one black climber a year. Maybe."

The same could be said of caving, kayaking, scuba diving, orienteering, surfing, hang-gliding, bouldering, birding, and just about any other intense wilderness pastime I can think of this side of hunting and fishing. Likewise, there's a conspicuous absence of black voices in the world of outdoor literature—not only black voices, but the voices of people of color in general. And with few exceptions, American environmentalism has always been a movement of monochrome white. The major environmental groups have long been aware of this problem, and during the early nineties, many made a conscientious effort to recruit nonwhites and to take up the cause of "environmental racism" (which charges, among other things, that industrialists have disproportionately located toxic dumps in minority neighborhoods). Yet lately the major American environmental groups have largely abandoned these efforts—which could perhaps be taken as a tacit acknowledgment of the wide gulf that separates white environmentalism from other shades of green.

But is this curious apartheid to be understood as a reality, or merely a perception of a reality? If you were to take only the images offered by television as a cue, you'd get the impression that blacks nowadays do just about everything everybody else does in America; there are black lawyers, black detectives, black ER docs, even black golfers, for god's sake. Blacks are everywhere to be found—everywhere, that is, but in the great outdoors. You don't see them bouncing through the Australian outback in the latest sport-utility wagon. You don't see them guzzling a sweat-beaded can of Coors Light against a backdrop of Rocky Mountain alpenglow.

Similarly, if you thumb through the pages of this magazine and many others, you'll have a tough time finding images of African-American blackness. In general the stories are neither about nor by blacks, and the advertisements hardly ever show a black person engaged in "outdoorsy" pastimes. Do the marketeers not expect to find black readers? Or do they merely not expect to find enough black buyers with the requisite sums of disposable income, and therefore choose not to target them? It's hard to tell, within this chicken-and-egg scenario, which comes first: the not being invited to the party and therefore not showing up, or the assumption that blacks party so differently that they need not be invited.

Still, it's a tricky thing for me to talk about this subject. For if it's true that blacks don't sail, don't surf, don't hike, what does it imply? That we don't like sunshine and spectacular scenery? That we harbor some deep-seated dread of water and snow? That we have an aversion to crisp, clean air?

And then, too, if there's a general rule about blacks in the outdoors, what do we make of the exceptions that are to be found just about everywhere, past and present? What about the prominent historical example of Matthew Henson, the noted black explorer who accompanied Robert E. Peary on numerous expeditions and, though Peary's exploration claims are contested, is still thought by many to have been the first person to stand at the North Pole?

To go back even further, what about the black "Buffalo Soldiers" of the U.S. Cavalry or the little-known but nonetheless rich traditions of black ranchers and miners and cow-
boys of the American West? If you visit the Black American West Museum and Heritage Center in Denver and talk for five minutes with its founder and curator, Paul Stewart, any lingering stereotypes that you might have about the racial makeup of the Wild West will be compellingly shattered. “There were blacks working on the wagon trains and black scouts in the army and black frontiersmen,” Stewart will tell you. “One quarter of the cowboys in the 1800s were black. But we don’t get the whole story—we’ve never gotten it.”

And how about today? The new director of the National Park Service, Robert Stanton, who was appointed last summer amid considerable fanfare, happens to be a black American. (But note the fanfare, and its implication.) A Washington, D.C.-based climber named Keith Ware plans to lead the first all-black expedition to the summit of Everest, in 2000. The National Brotherhood of Skiers is a black organization with some 14,000 members; four years ago, 6,000 of them descended on Vail, Colorado, to celebrate the Brotherhood’s 20th anniversary. It was one of the largest ski conventions in history.

And there is William Pinkney, a Chicagoan who is probably the best-known black sailor in the world. Pinkney is the first African-American (and one of only four Americans) to have completed a solo circumnavigation of the earth via its five southernmost capes. When I asked Pinkney about the apparent dearth of blacks in the outdoors, he replied that this was simply nonsense. “If blacks seem largely invisible in this particular universe, he argued, it’s because whites don’t want to see us.”

“I say it’s a numbers game,” Pinkney insisted. “In the outdoors you’re dealing with a small proportion of the population anyway. For most Americans, the great outdoors is the distance from the front door to the car. Add to that the fact that we’re a minority of a minority, and of course the numbers are going to be small. But we’re out there.”

My friend Jacob Smith, a St. Louis shoe repairman who is an avid outdoorsman, emphatically agrees with Pinkney, and he chided me for giving this topic even a moment’s thought. “The whole thing’s ridiculous, he said to me. “Of course black people fish and ski and do everything else.” After all, he’s a fly fisherman. He skis. And he’s black.

But when I asked him to name someone else out there besides the two of us, he came up short. “Still,” he insisted, “saying that black people don’t do this thing or that thing is like saying black people don’t like cars. It’s just an assumption. And like just about every assumption made about black people in America, it’s an assumption that’s dead wrong.”

He appeared quite sure of this when he spoke, but for both of us, the question dangled there uneasily.

I want to ensure that when he looks up from tying a pale morning dries onto his line, he knows he must share the stream with me and my blackness, that the best places are not for him alone.

Glacier National Park. I climbed a Rocky Mountain ice field on the border between British Columbia and Alberta. Finally, I made my way to Alaska’s salmon and trout streams. I unpacked my rod and got ready for what I knew sooner or later would come: the first look, and then the words that ask what I’m doing here.

Sure enough, beside a stream on the Kenai Peninsula, I met an advertising executive named Michael who lives in Anchorage. “The first words out of his mouth were words of wonderment, “I never knew a black man who was a fly fisherman,” he said, matter-of-factly.

He didn’t say fisherman. He said fly fisherman. Michael’s surprise came not from the fact that I fish, for black people fish all over the place, on the banks of the Potomac or the James, in the bayous of Louisiana, on lakes and streams everywhere. We have always been, in fact, a rural, outdoor people—from when we were African to the time when we were uprooted and shipped to this new land to work as plantation field hands and then as sharecroppers. But like the natives of North America who likewise lived for countless generations on the land, or Hispanics, or Middle Easterners, or Laorians, or Polynesians, or just about anyone of color, blacks are not thought of in the context of this new love affair with the recreational outdoors.

No, Michael’s surprise came from the simple fact that my tastes leaned in certain directions and that I, as a black man, would be drawn to a style of fishing widely thought to be reserved for white squares.

Michael and I became good friends and fishing buddies. But on an earlier trip I’d had a similar encounter, with another form of generalization that I found both idiotic and insulting. I stopped one night at a bed-and-breakfast in Bath, Maine, and the next morning one of the guests, a young, middle-aged man nearing retirement, accosted me as I fitted my fly rod into its holder on the back of the motorcycle. He recognized the metal tube for what it was and right away took offense when I told him that I was on my way to do a little fishing in the Canadian Rockies, that I had fished prime trout waters from Scotland to South Africa.

He seemed shocked, almost angry. “I’ve

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worked all my life to be able to afford to do some of those things,” he declared, “and I can’t do them—how can you?”

I wasn’t enthralled to be standing next to this pathetic man, who’d somehow managed to fuse economic prejudice with racial prejudice in a single thoughtless sentence.

Nor am I enthralled with my usual role as the only black face among the new breed of recreational nusties. I wish there were others. But I want to make sure that when someone like this man looks up from tying a pale morning dun onto his fly line, he knows that he and his whiteness will have to share the stream with me and my blackness, that the outdoors, the hidden coves and the mountain fastnesses and all the best places, are not reserved for him and his alone.

If the wilderness were not such a formidable place, we would not venerate the Indian tribes and the mountain folk and the frontiersmen and the cowboys who “tamed” the West and carved out a life from its harshness, nor would we seek to emulate them in tests of outdoor skill and courage. But concerning the challenges of nature, black Americans have an added element to deal with, one that white Americans can’t fully fathom and that African-Americans are perhaps just beginning to come to terms with.

The black writer Evelyn C. White defined this challenge eloquently in an essay for the San Francisco Chronicle a few years ago. “It is not the sky or the trees or the creeks that have harmed us, but rather the people we have encountered along the way,” she wrote. “Ask yourself why a black woman would find solace under the sun knowing that her great-great-grandmothers had toiled in brutal, blistering heat for slavemasters. It’s no mystery to me why millions of African-Americans fled the ‘pastoral South’ for the grit and grime of northern cities.”

The point, of course, is that historically bad things have happened to black people in the outdoors. If we choose to conjure them up, our associations with the woods can easily run in the direction of bloodhounds, swinging hemp ropes, and cracker Wizards in Klan sheets. And those associations, I think, play a large though largely unspoken role in this whole question.

This fear is not confined to the distant past. In 1985, when I was 30 years old,

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and living in St. Louis, I decided to canoe the Mississippi River from its source in Minnesota down to New Orleans and write a book about the trip. It was an impetuous plan, and one for which I was quite ill-prepared. I'd scarcely been in a canoe before. I'd been camping perhaps twice in my entire life.

Growing up in St. Louis, the closest I came to the outdoors was the time or two I walked in the Missouri woods, clutching a shotgun in my hands, with my oldest brother at my side. He was a hunter and a fisherman, but his hunting and fishing were of the straightforward putting-meat-on-the-table variety. No fancy gear, no exotic locales, and the trophies were ducks from the lake, rabbits from the woods, catfish from the river.

My father would sometimes accompany us. I had noticed that he would never venture into the woods alone without carrying a gun, and he discouraged me from ever heading out into the countryside by myself. When I was in the Boy Scouts, he refused to let me go camping. His justification was always the same: snakes. "What do you want to sleep out in the woods for?" he'd say. "You want to get bit by a copperhead?"

If you're not accustomed to it, of course, the deep woods can be a frightening place, with its twigs snapping in the night, its snakes and bears and mountain lions that know no discrimination based on color or race. But I always suspected there was something else that my dad was afraid of. The other boys in my all-black Scout troop rarely went camping either. I sensed that their parents might have had the same fears.

Yet in the fall of 1985 I cast aside all that dread and canoed the length of the Mississippi River. Somewhere in the canebrake of Tennessee, I set up camp in the midst of a downpour. It rained all night long and well into the morning. At some point a pack of wild animals wandered up in the dark and snuggled around the edges of my tent to steal a bit of my warmth. When I poked on the hinges in the tent wall, they growled at me—feral dogs. They had me pinned down and so terrified that I could not sleep. I lay packed tight in my bedroll and cuffed the pistol I'd brought along. When I finally bolted from the tent the next morning, one of the dogs charged me. I aimed the pistol at his chest and fired a single shot. The rest of the pack fled back into the woods.

But later that same voyage, on another night, at another campsite, a different source of fear came creeping out of the woods toward me. Nearing my trip's end, I made my camp on the Mississippi side of the river. I pitched my tent, built a fire, and started cooking my dinner. A possum rustled the leaves. When the branches rustled a second time, I thought nothing of it.

Then out of the woods came the bad dream. On the edge of the darkness, where the light from my campfire faded into shadows, stood the figures that must haunt the imagination of every black American who has heard the old stories about Emmett Till and James Earl Chaney and Willie Edwards. Two greasy-haired, camouflage-wearing white hunters materialized out of the forest lining the river and aimed their shotguns at me.

"Hey," one of them said. "Look what we got here."

"And I haven't shot at anything all day," the other one said.

It was deer season and they'd been out hunting, without success. I was not about to be used for target practice in the night. So I pulled the pistol from my boot and I shot in their general direction. When they scattered, I hastily broke camp and, wrought up with anger and fear, hopped into my canoe and sprinted for the middle of the river.

As I paddled toward the Gulf of Mexico, I was certain of the malevolence of man, and of those two men in particular. But as I reflect upon it now, it occurs to me that there might not have been anything particularly racial about that situation. And I suppose it's possible, remotely possible, that I reacted prematurely, an impulsive response rooted in the old black-and-white fears that I had hauled downriver with me. Perhaps.

The natural world, however, is neither black nor white. It is forest green, desert ochre, deep ocean blue. If there are barriers that keep us all from immersing ourselves in it and savoring its riches, they may be reducible, in part, to economics, to geography, to history, and to culture. But mostly they exist in our minds, in the fears and misconceptions that continue to keep us suspended in our separate limbo, unable to come together, even in a place as universally inviting as the world outside our doors.

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