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The Tourists: Having No Memory or Relationships in a Landscape, They Make Dangerous Mistakes

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The Tourists

Having no memory or relationships in a landscape, they make dangerous mistakes

Hilary Smith



THE TOURISTS START COMING IN MID-MARCH WHEN THE RIVER IS STILL too high to swim. They spread out their towels on the rocks and sunbathe, let their dogs splash around the shallow pools, leave the first of the toilet paper flowers on the side of the packed dirt trail. They admire the wildflowers and the swirling emerald water. They build cairns of river stones and take photos of them. The sun leaves the canyon by midafternoon and the tourists leave too. Then I hike down the hill and push the cairns over, scattering the stones again, flinging them back into place.

By mid-April, the trickle of tourists has turned into a swarm. The little parking lot is full now, Subarus and Priuses squeezing into any semi-viable space, and the swimming hole that was known only to locals just a few years ago is receiving the first of thousands of Instagram snaps it will receive this summer alone. The cairns proliferate; I knock them down. Campfire rings appear; I feel a knot in the pit of my stomach. The tourists were not here last year, when a spark from a tourist's campfire started a fire that raced up the hillside a couple miles beyond where I'm standing now. My neighbors were evacuated with their two babies, the roof of their hand-built cabin sprayed with bright red flame retardant. The trees on the hillside are still charred black; in the fall I went hunting for morels on the burned ground, unsuccessfully.

But the tourists keep on building campfires because the tourists have no memory. They have no memory and no relationships; they don't know Aubrey and Michael and their two babies, or Ralph and Nancy up the road. They don't know the pine needles that catch fire in a flash or the dry grasses that are already practically burning in their dryness. Having no memory and no relationships makes the tourists dangerous. They make mistakes that nobody with memory or relationships would ever make. Since we have lived on the river canyon, I have learned to be more afraid of tourists than I am of bears.

They are curious beings, the tourists. They are reckless where they ought to be cautious, diving into swimming holes whose boulders have shifted since the previous summer's Google reviews declared them safe, and lighting the aforementioned campfires in red flag conditions. And they are cautious where they ought to be adventurous, avoiding eye contact with locals who could enrich their experience of the river with tales and advice, and neglecting to taste the wild blackberries whose vines clamber over the warm river rocks. They bring battery-powered speakers to broadcast tinny music over the sound

The western river that attracts tourists in the internet age. HILARY SMITH

of the waterfall and set up yoga mats on top of mugwort patches the Nisenan Tribe planted to keep ghosts away. The tourists offend not through malice but through ignorance: They just don't know how to *be* in this place, and they don't seem particularly interested in finding out.

The tourists smirked at me once when I asked them not to park their car in a fire lane. This narrow bridge, I explained, is the sole evacuation route for the small rural community that lives up the hill. In the increasingly likely case of a wildfire, I told them, *your car* will be the thing blocking my neighbors from escaping the flames. In the case of a child drowning in the river, I continued, *your car* will be the thing slowing emergency responders from giving cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Their smiles grew more and more bemused the more I tried to help them understand. "Thank you," they crooned when I finally walked away. Then they continued on to the river, leaving their car in the fire lane, where three or four other vehicles were already parked. Why should they be the ones to give up their spot, when everybody else was doing it? Or at least, everybody with no concept of the smoke and terror, everybody without an elderly uncle living on that hill, everybody who had never gotten stuck behind a traffic jam of tourists on the bridge while trying to drive a neighbor to the emergency room in town, twelve miles away, everybody, in short, with no memory and no relationships.

The tourists would like me to take their photograph and would be happy to take my photograph too. They seem confused when I tell them I don't need a photograph; I live here. "Like, *here* here?" they say, looking around at the steep wooded slopes. "I thought nobody lived here." They think they are in a wilderness. They have driven up from San Francisco, Berkeley, Sacramento, Vacaville, to visit the wilderness. They seem baffled to discover that the vast wilderness they imagine is actually a narrow strip of river canyon that local people fought for 40 years to protect. Outside the narrow strip are highways, gold mines, timber company lands, agriculture. The tourists request that I take the photograph in such a way that you can't see any other tourists in the background. With a little effort, I comply.

The tourists panicked once when they saw me coming down the trail in my National Park Service jacket. They grabbed their dog, which was off-leash, and smiled at me ingratiatingly. "Hello, Officer," said a member of their party. "It is just so beautiful here, oh my gosh." It took me a moment to realize they had mistaken me for a park ranger. I hesitated, trying to decide whether to let them know I'd found the jacket in a dumpster, or take advantage of the mistaken identity. Why did I need a government job title to legitimize my

activities at the river? I picked up trash, broke up campfire rings, put up No Campfires signs, tried to convince tourists to move their cars out of the fire lane—yet, if the tourists found out I was a local resident, and not a ranger, they would ignore me if I asked them to pick up the pile of still-warm dog waste I could see on the side of the trail a few feet behind them. I decided to enjoy the unexpected power, even if it was ill-gotten. “The fine for off-leash dogs is a hundred and fifty dollars,” I said. “But I’ll let it go this time if you pick up your dog’s mess.”



Wildflowers bloom high above the river. HILARY SMITH

After that, I start wearing the National Park Service jacket all the time. It's a really old jacket, and I wear it with Carhartt pants and a straw hat, but the tourists don't seem to know what a real ranger is supposed to look like, and I'm happy to let them think whatever they like. The outfit makes me bold. I walk right up to a campsite someone has set up on the river and start dismantling their campfire ring, flinging the stones into the river, splashing water onto the still-glowing logs. A tourist in blue swim trunks watches me from the swimming hole. As soon as I'm gone, he scrambles out of the water and begins to break down his tent. I climb up past the waterfall to watch him go.

My neighbors remember how it was before the tourists. They would take their babies to the river and swim and enjoy the greenness and the warmth of the rocks. The trail was faint, not this eroded gash through the side of the hill. They would stay by the river all day, talking to the people they knew, enjoying the company of the trees and plants and boulders they'd known year after year. Then came the newspaper articles and the blog posts—"Top Ten Swimming Holes," "Best-Kept Secrets"—and the tourists started to come in droves, coming to see the wilderness, the idyll.

I print more No Campfires signs to put up at the river. Then I make some No Parking—Fire Lane signs for the road. I try to make the signs look friendly. I add a heart graphic so the tourists know I am asking with love. I add helpful explanations in smaller font: "Last year a wildfire started from a tourist's campfire and nearly burned down this entire canyon. Please protect this special place!" I laminate the signs and tie one to the big madrone at the swimming hole, one to a telephone pole near the bridge, a couple more to signposts in the parking lot. As I walk around putting the signs up, I can't stop noticing the beetle-killed pines, the dry grass, the campfire rings I haven't broken up yet. Maybe I should make a new sign with a picture of a campfire, an arrow, and a picture of a burning river canyon. Would the tourists understand the concept then?

I've stopped going to the river for pleasure. Now, I only go there to patrol. I bring gloves, a flashlight, a bag for recycling and trash. I want to enjoy the river, but it's like trying to enjoy a doughnut that's being devoured by ants. The tourists have no memory and no relationships. I have too much of both, and it's killing me. Maybe I should ask them to take a photo of me, one with no tourists in the background. Maybe then I would delight in this place as uncomplicatedly as the tourists do.

I write to the county and ask them to put up better No Parking signs at the fire lanes. I call the police and report the illegally parked cars. I stand on

the hillside and wave a light at the tourists having a campfire on the riverbank. I flash the light on and off in what I hope is a menacing way.

The tourists are having a campout on their way home from a music festival. They park their buses and vans at the trailhead and leave little plastic unicorns in the forest, along the trail, to show their friends how to find them. They wear tutus and leopard print and laugh as they pick their way down the canyon, to the bend in the river where the bank is wide and flat enough to pitch tents. As the first stars come out they set up a sound system and play electronic music, take photos of each other, and dance.

The tourists will have great memories of this night. They will remember the bliss they felt by the river, the smiles of their friends in the moonlight. They will scroll through the photos on Facebook and Instagram, photos that make it look as if they are all alone in a beautiful canyon with no edge or boundary and no consequences. My memories of the river will be of a dull ache, a brokenheartedness that makes me duck my head lest anyone should see. I will remember shuffling along in my National Park Service jacket, tugging cigarette butts out from between the rocks, the sound of my voice friendly and strained as I try to explain about fires, about drowning, about so many aspects of life the tourists don't seem to know.

In the morning I hike down the river and knock the cairns down. I collect plastic unicorns from the sweet-smelling duff. In the parking lot, the tourists are getting ready to leave. It is September now, and with school starting and the weather turning colder the flow of tourists will soon be slowing down. I stand there in my National Park Service jacket and watch them drive away. Soon, the rains will come, and for the next few months I'll be able to imagine that I live in a wilderness. I'll pick my way along the riverbank, alone and at peace, tidying up the tourists' beer cans and cigarette butts at my leisure. I'll sit by the swimming hole, my view unobstructed, and watch yellow oak leaves drift down from the trees. I'll mull over my relationships and my memories and make endless, futile plans for the next year's batch of No Campfires signs and fire lane interventions. "Protect what you love," I'll write on the signs. Then I'll tie one onto the big madrone, pat its smooth red bark, and walk away.

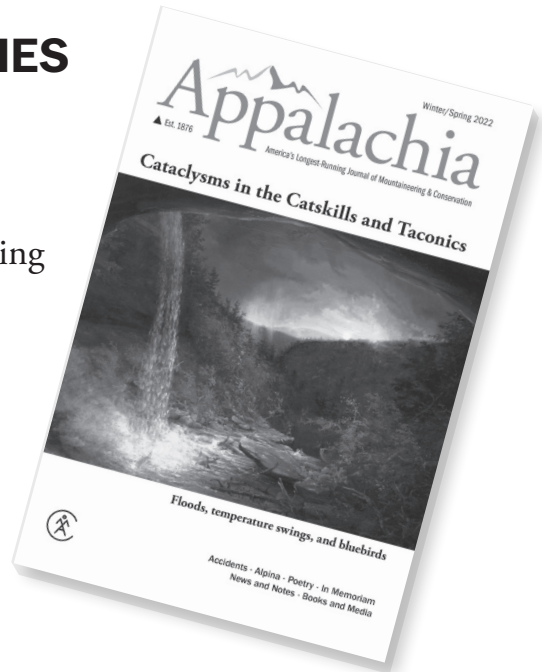
HILARY SMITH's writing explores the ways in which humans try to cope in an increasingly inhumane world. She lives on Hawaii Island. This essay was the runner-up in our 2020 Waterman Fund Essay Contest.

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