



Dreams of the Stone Age

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Wild



Our primitive ancestors may not have been that primitive after all. It seems their stones, sticks and bones provided something our iPhones, robots and Botox can't replace. CMC writer Lisa Richardson reports on how we space-age Homo Sapiens could use a tool or two from mankind's prehistoric past.

Photographs by Kili Yu



Jesse Jameson and Emma Doige, two members of the Living Wild Project.

All important ideas must include the trees, the mountains, and the rivers.

—Mary Oliver

UNIVERSITY HADN'T PANNED OUT as Emma Doige had expected. "I had no friggin' idea at 18 years old what I wanted to do," she says, eight years later. "I pretty much drank and partied that year and a half away." After her brother took his life, Doige dropped out and fled Ottawa, Ontario, for Whistler, British Columbia. It was there she saw a photograph that would alter her trajectory unexpectedly. The image—a group of Stone Age revivalists—popped up on her Facebook feed. "I saw it and said, 'I don't know who that is or what they're doing or what it's about, but I want to go.'"

Doige signed up for a basic course in primitive skills that September, five years ago. "How have more people not heard of this?" she wondered, as she learned how to make fire without matches and build a shelter without tools beyond the rocks, sticks and grasses that the land offered up. It seemed so obvious to her, so fundamental, so grounded. "I was totally thrown in, completely in awe," she says. She couldn't get enough of it, and although the teacher warned her she was too inexperienced and would have to work her ass off, she signed up the following summer for a three-month-long immersion in the Stone Age.

Doige's parents drove her down to Lynx Vilden's Living Wild School, a five-acre property in Twisp, Washington, that has become Vilden's base for offering "dirt time." She holds months of hands-on classes that teach you to live off the grid in rudimentary conditions, without running water, electricity or cell-phone service, and where you learn to reclaim ancestral skills, like harvesting wild edible plants, making deer-hide clothes, fire-starting, and making gourd canteens and burden baskets. Once participants have crafted their own Stone Age camping kit, they have the option of going out on a month-long walkabout, living as hunter-gatherers in the North Cascades. Vilden's goal is to empower people, through Stone Age skills, to be more comfortable in the wilderness. It's not survivalist, despite the post-Apocalyptic prepper vibe that a crew of deer-skin-clad, bow-and-arrow wielding neo-Neanderthals can conjure. Vilden says it's about thriving—more pro-nature, than anti-civilization—although the two do not harmonize easily, as many of her graduates discover.



FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

The Living Wild group pauses for a rest on a ridge, a twice-daily ritual to scout the valley for encroaching forest fires, which has surrounded their camp on three sides. Living with intense forest fires is a dangerous but unavoidable part of wilderness living in the age of climate change.

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WEIGHT OF THE WORLD During the project, the group struggles up a scree slope in 100-degree heat. Every person carries between 18 and 40 kilograms (40 and 90 pounds) of primitive gear as they migrate their camp to a valley with better hunting prospects.

Vilden, a lithe, 52-year-old blonde with a Swedish-British mash-up of an accent, has pursued and taught primitive skills for over half her life, ever since studying with Tom Brown's Tracker School and Peter Bigfoot's Mountain School of Self-Reliance replaced her own punk-rock, hard-partying ways with a serious nature fix. Vilden makes the rules for her Living Wild immersions, and the rules are full-on from the paleo period: nothing from the modern world. Nothing even from the Bronze Age. It's rocks, sticks and bones all the way.

There for several months, alongside a motley clan of seekers, Emma Doige found her rhythm around the campfire, tanning deer hides, preparing everything she'd need to go out into the mountains for one month: a full set of buckskin clothes and bedding, cooking pots and dried food, all made using only Stone Age tools. "It rained pretty much the entire time. But I loved it," she says. "I was hungry for more." They learned more than just friction fire-making, foraging, shelter-building, fishing, hunting, animal processing and tool-making: it was a different way of looking at the world, how to strip away the layers that insulate us from nature, go barefoot, listen to a stone to find the one that wants to be chosen as your implement, how to move with the land and accept gifts. They learned how to become part of a community that is as much an ecosystem as an outpost of civilization.

Doige went back again the next summer, in 2014, a year of

THE LIVING WILD SCHOOL OFFERS HANDS-ON CLASSES THAT TEACH YOU TO LIVE OFF THE GRID IN RUDIMENTARY CONDITIONS WITHOUT RUNNING WATER, ELECTRICITY OR CELL-PHONE SERVICE, AND WHERE YOU LEARN TO RECLAIM ANCESTRAL SKILLS.

wildfires, and she says she'd do it again. "As arduous as it was, it was also amazing," she explains. "I learned so much about myself. When I'd moved to Whistler after my brother died, I didn't experience as much healing as I could. At Lynx's, just the dynamic of being and living as a clan was so fun, being held so powerfully by so many people I'd never met, people who were gentle and who wanted to be close to the land. It's transformative. Completely heart-filling."

Going back to the real world, though, wasn't easy. She'd become a girl from another time, wearing her buckskins through the streets of Ottawa, looking for like-minded souls, working as the manager of a health-food store and looking for a home to buy with her partner, which necessitated a mortgage, a nine-to-five life, and plugging back into the system. "It's a powerful thing to know how to live with the land," she says. "I just wish I had the balls to do it for real."



COLD SMOKE The early morning is a difficult time to have a fire; the ground is damp and the air chilly. Neil is an expert in using a bow-drill friction set to make a fire.

“OUR ANCESTORS WERE bad asses,” says Matt Forkin, a 32-year-old engineer from Oakland, California. After Forkin graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering and sculpture, he worked developing solar panels, consulting and designing factories throughout Asia. “I saw firsthand how materials are made, how energy is made, and I was very saddened by the amount of destruction in all these processes,” he explains. “Even to make a solar panel does irreparable harm to the planet. It’s just the bread and butter of our world: destructive and unsustainable.” He wanted to explore other ways of being human, and he ended up at Vilden’s for two years, culminating in the one-month-long walkabout.

The summer of 2014, the North Cascades were ravaged by wildfires. Some people left the month-long walkabout, abandoning the project out of safety concerns. The remaining 10 were on the move constantly: wild food was hard to find and smoke was a constant reminder that what they were doing had very real stakes. Tensions mounted. “There came a point where some people were running low on food,” recalls Forkin. “There was some fighting. In the end, we said the most important thing is that we’re doing this all together. As a clan. As a family. If this was literally our family, we would choose to be generous, and that’s what we decided to do. It was a beautiful moment, but I wish we’d had that from the start.”

But being generous is not a modern way to think or behave, especially when scarcity sinks its fearful claws into our brains. Our contemporary, non-indigenous culture doesn’t have built-in methods of enforcing community. “None of us [on the project] grew up

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in a communal culture,” he says. “We grew up in a me-first social setting, not one where what’s best for all beings is the most important. It was hard for us all. It takes a lot of skill and energy.”

It’s not just about shooting arrows. The tools might be the starting point, but as it turns out, they’re the smallest part of what it means to awaken your inner wild.

JESSE JAMESON’S TOOL skills are hard to debate. For eight years, the primitive-skills movement took him deep down. He harvests all his own meat, is passionate about hide-tanning and is completely at ease in untamed spaces. Jameson spent three years at Vilden’s, two of them as her assistant, and he has taught on the circuit of primitive-skills gatherings across the country.



LOCALLY SOURCED Top: Matthew Forkin gathers saxifrage plants for dinner. Bottom: Forkin chases a marmot he's shot with an arrow.

Recently, the 28-year-old from Sebastopol, California, has been rethinking things, trying to rebalance his life. "I've been living in a place of big ego and dogmatism of the skills," he says, spoofing himself. "Oh, I'm learning the skills of my ancestors and I'm saving the world doing it. I'm so much better than you."

After a trip to Laos and Cambodia last summer — his first major venture out of the primitive-skills milieu — he was struck by waves of realization. "I have spent all this time witnessing the seasons and spending months harvesting food," he says. "But I realized how much I'd isolated myself, how beautiful cities are, how much culture I'd been missing being alone out on the land."

He articulates a sense of loneliness, the fragmentation in the community, as everyone follows their hearts in a thousand different directions. Even amongst primitive-skills devotees, community is

occasional. The desire to be self-reliant brings disparate individuals together, temporarily, to share ancestral know-how. Jameson fumbles with a sense of something missing. "I don't know what it was like 500 years ago, but there had to be some major compromises for people to stick together," he says.

In the present, we're more accustomed to choice than compromise. To live a life truly enmeshed with the land and to subsist from it might require less self-reliance and a lot more interdependence, where being part of the collective doesn't come with an opt-out clause.

Matt Forkin has interpreted that as a call to action. He could have returned to engineering, made good money and bought himself a little homestead to live close to the land. Instead, he's opted in, and he's trying to sharpen the lessons of the Stone Age to a fine

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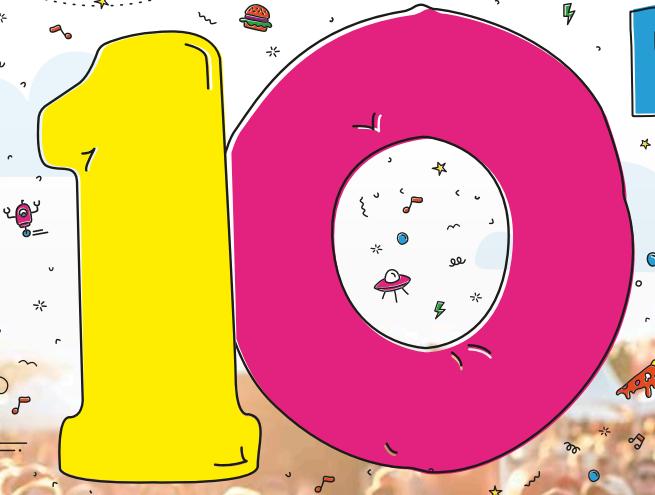
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-Paulo Freire

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BAGGED Jessie Watson Brown avoids a crowded bark shelter on a dry night by sleeping outside in her buffalo blanket, trying to expose as little of herself as possible to morning mosquitoes.

point. “For me, primitive ways of living is one example, and the most complete example, of people living in such a way that they had a positive impact,” he says. “Our role as people is to be the caretakers of the Earth, not just to take care of our own needs but to interact with the land to make things better.”

Coming home from the Living Wild camp was disconcerting, noisy and intense after his two-year sojourn living as part of nature. And then there were all the jokes. “How does it feel to be back in the real world?” was what he would hear constantly from friends and family. He’d spent months going barefoot, eating nothing packaged, processed or even domesticated, with his senses on full alert. He had established intimate relationships with every life form around him, right down to the rocks. What he used, he had made from scratch. It seemed to him that he’d just left the real world, a vital, pulsing world, and re-entered one that was entirely fabricated.

But he is a fabricator. An engineer. A sculptor. A craftsman. The thread that runs through whichever world he’s in—the wild or the manufactured, the ancient or the endangered—is his passion for making things, for discovering better systems for making things, processes that don’t damage the Earth irreparably. Learning to make fire or a spear or a basket or a primitive fishing rod is ultimately just tool knowledge. Humans have always had a vexed relationship with their tools: our ingenuity and ability to make them is our super-skill, an expression of creativity and collaboration. It gave our species its edge, enabled us to flourish, dominate and eventually bring life on Earth to the brink of the sixth mass extinction. But we’ve also crafted exquisitely beautiful things out of the

planet’s raw materials. We’ve collaborated with living systems. Most simply, the mindful harvesting of wood or animals helps eliminate the weaker and the diseased, a care-tending approach that yields healthier ecosystems for the human impact.

For Forkin, the driving modern question is not just one about how to minimize our negative impact, but how do we have a net positive impact? He’s working with non-profits and start-ups in California’s San Francisco Bay area, amongst the hubbub, to leverage technology and his engineering skills to craft entirely new ways of making things, inspired by an ancient way of thinking. “It goes back to trying to do something collectively,” he says. “I don’t have any models for it. It’s good in theory. But it’s tough. I’m trying to be part of the work to co-create a better economic future, to build systems to benefit all beings.”

Without any sense of obligation or interdependence to other living beings, our latest technologies are likely to enrapture us and enslave us. We let them take over, run amok, wreak havoc: fire, plows, guns, deep-sea ocean trawlers, fibre-optic cable, biological weapons, genetic engineering, robots, search engines. Having an impact, it seems, is part and parcel of being a human. Maybe it’s time to start embracing that and make it big—and beneficial. It’s not without precedent. It’s just a lost art, waiting to be reclaimed.

Lisa Richardson lives in Pemberton, British Columbia, and hopes to make up for her lack of basic survival skills by judicious selection of her Apocalypse team. That is, if they’ll join her.