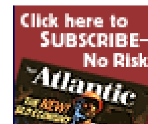

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MARCH 1999

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The Question of Burns

ANDREW Colaninno, dressed in his Forest Service greens, led me from the midday warmth of Florida winter into the cool of the Apalachee Restaurant. We wended our way between the tables where a few hours ago, at breakfast, the main topic of conversation had been the foolish policies of the Forest Service. Now, at lunchtime, the ranger was just another person who wanted a meal. The waitress arrived and addressed me as "honey," as she had earlier. When she departed with our order, I summarized for Colaninno the complaints I had heard here at breakfast. The biggest gripe of the morning crowd had been that the Forest Service wastes its time studying insects in the savannas.

"Yeah," Colaninno confessed. "We're studying just about any component of the ecosystem you can put a finger on. We're studying insects in the savannas. We're studying the effects of uneven-age management on RCWs -- red-cockaded woodpeckers. And this is the fourth year of the study on earthworms."

I repeated Charles McCranie's complaint that the baiters should have been consulted about the change in the permit fee.

"We would have talked with them if we knew how," Colaninno answered. "I could have put an ad in the paper and said we were going to have a public meeting to talk about baiting policy. I can guarantee you that the turnout would have been zilch. These people don't read the paper. They don't pay attention to public meetings. We don't have any kind of mailing list for baiters, because we don't know who they are. The information on the permit doesn't include their address and phone number, because baiters are paranoid about being contacted by anyone from government."

I summarized McCranie's complaints about the Forest Service's burning policy: the agency burns too much, burns on too short a cycle, and is negligent in failing to close, post, and then guard its burns to prevent baiters from overharvesting them.

"Yeah, I hear what he's saying *now,*" Colaninno replied. "But it's not what the

baiters were saying before." Prior to the era of large-scale prescribed burning, he said, the Apalachicola had a huge arson problem -- 300 or 400 fires each year, many of them set by baiters. When the Forest Service posted those burns and closed them to baiting, the arson started to decline. When the agency began burning large tracts on its own, the number of arsons plummeted. "It's a very recent thing for us to hear that we're burning too much," he said. "We were hearing just the opposite a few years ago." Colaninno would love to guard posted burns, he said, but he had only two law-enforcement officers to patrol the entire forest.

Speaking of the baiters' rebellion, he said, "I was really completely surprised. Generally I try to avoid making regulations that are likely to piss off a bunch of people. There's no gain in it. You waste your time. I honestly thought we had it pretty well scoped out, based on what the public had told us. When we encounter baiters in the field, we stop and talk with them. We're not quite as ignorant as the baiters claim we are."

"Did it hurt your feelings?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I don't take it personally. I've been a district ranger for about ten years of a seventeen-year career. I've had angry mobs before. There's ways of handling them and there's ways of not handling them."

Of all the communities and ecosystems in which he had worked, he liked this one best. "The folks here are willing to accept you as a neighbor," he said. "Accept you as someone working for an organization that has to make tough decisions, not as an enemy. Nobody here has ever been personally ugly to me because I worked for the Forest Service." As for the land, he said, "I've worked in big, towering mountains. When I was on the Six Rivers, in California, you could go up into the highest peaks and see Mount Shasta off in the distance to the west. It was really beautiful. You could see why people fell in love with it. But the Apalachicola has a subtle beauty that kind of grows on you. You become attached to it. You feel more of a rhythm with it -- at least I do. That may be because I grew up in the South. I have an affinity for beautiful flat wetland swamps." He laughed. "Mountains to me are so obvious."

Superworm

CHARLES McCranie handed me a stob and an iron, indicated a likely-looking spot, and suggested I have a go. I drove down, as we say in the Apalachicola. When the stob was one-third buried, I dropped to my knees in the soot of the burn and commenced grunting. My first few strokes were squeaky and pathetic. I did not lean enough weight on the iron, and it skipped over the top of the stob. If every baiter has a distinctive rhythm, mine was a stutter.

Embarrassed, I bore down harder. Suddenly my stammering stob found its voice -- just the sort of stentorian, boot-tingling grunt I was after. I hit it four or five resonant licks, and worms began issuing from the ground. As we stooped to pick them up, McCranie and Eddie proclaimed me a natural. They made a fuss over me, as one does to encourage a child. McCranie held up one of my biggest worms.

"This is what we're looking for today," he said. "That's what the market wants this time of year -- a real big, big worm that will live good. None of the buyers expect a worm that lives forever, but you have to give them a worm that holds up." He ruminated a moment over my worm. "The biggest, prettiest worms are the hardest worms to get," he said. "My pet theory about this is -- well, I'm a big Darwinian. I believe in natural selection and survival of the fittest. I think that the worm that is the toughest, that can lay under the ground the longest, survives. You don't get all the worms in a given place. They don't all come up. Only the toughest, most vibration-resistant worms are left to breed. Therefore their offspring are genetically programmed to resist that vibration."

"So you baiters are selectively breeding a superworm," I suggested. "And you're selecting yourself out of business."

"Well, it's going to become harder and

harder and harder over the years. That stands to reason. The worms that respond most easily and quickly are the first ones got."

Creationism is strong in his neck of the woods, McCranie conceded. Darwin is not a popular figure among his neighbors in the Florida Panhandle. Yet McCranie remains committed to Darwin's great theory. "There's no arguing against it, unless you're a complete idiot. Whatever religion you are, you have to believe in natural selection." McCranie admitted that he had not read Darwin's treatise on earthworms. "I've read some of his theories on coral reefs," he said apologetically.

The Formation of Vegetable Mould Through the Action of Worms, With Observations on Their Habits remains a current text in soil biology. "Worms do not possess any sense of hearing," Darwin wrote. "They took not the least notice of the shrill notes from a metal whistle, which was repeatedly sounded near them; nor did they of the deepest and loudest tones of a bassoon. They were indifferent to shouts, if care was taken that the breath did not strike them." Between these lines are wonderful images, I think: Darwin serenading earthworms with his bassoon, shouting at them like a drill

sergeant, hailing them with face averted, so as not to offend with his breath.

Investigating the folk belief that vibration of the ground signals *Mole!* to earthworms, Darwin conducted a simple experiment: "I beat the ground in many places where worms abounded, but not one emerged. When, however, the ground is dug with a fork and is violently disturbed beneath a worm, it will often crawl quickly out of its burrow."

Darwin, then, was a baiter himself. His technique was a little crude, but he had tried his hand at grunting.

Where Darwin's worm research was pure science, Charles McCranie's is applied. As we wandered deeper into the woods, McCranie laid out his own treatise. It was, in effect, *A Natural History of Worms and the Human Beings Who Hunt Them, With Observations on the Habits of Both.*

"They used to bait commercially in Taylor County, south of here. But the worms played out. And Calhoun County! Calhoun County was the capital for baiting in Florida, period. The whole worm business started in Calhoun County. That was the home of the worm. That's where the very prettiest, very best, ever come from. But now they have planted so many soybeans, sprayed so much pesticide, planted so many pine trees, they've exterminated the worms for commercial purposes in Calhoun

County. When they couldn't bait there any longer, they moved here to Apalachicola National Forest -- to Liberty County and Wakulla County."

In the Apalachicola, last stronghold of *Diplocardia mississippiensis,* the earth is sometimes so turgid with worms that they burst forth at the mere clang of the stob being hammered down. The baiter must drop his iron and begin picking up worms before he has properly started grunting at all. In the most prolific of "honeyholes," those around Sopchoppy in particular, worms sometimes completely cover the ground around the baiter, blanching earth as passenger pigeons once darkened sky. When the ground is dry and hard, worms will surface as far as thirty yards from the stob. On dry hills -- or on those imperceptible rises that are called hills in the Apalachicola -- the vibration of the grunt seems to carry particularly well, causing worms to rise sixty yards away. In wet ground the vibration is damped, and the circle of the effect is much smaller. Smut, as the baiters call the dry soot of freshly burned land, is abrasive until rain has softened it. Earthworms cannot define smut, but they know it when they feel it. To the moist skin of the worm, which serves it simultaneously as tactile, respiratory, and seismographic organs, smut evidently is a greater irritant than the vibration of the grunt, for on smutty land the baiting is terrible. "If the wind is blowing across smut, you might as well forget it,"

McCranie said. "You can grunt until your eyeballs pop out. They won't come up." Many baiters profess to prefer baiting on grass, because it is aesthetically pleasing and the work is cleaner -- but the pragmatic reality is that whenever land is burned, all the baiters in the Apalachicola fly toward it. A grunt that raises fifty worms on scorched earth is more profitable than a grunt that raises 150 worms on grass, because the baiter can retrieve those fifty worms so much faster. Many of the up to 40,000 miles that Charles McCranie puts on his truck each year are logged in search of burns. "Scouting smut," he says, "just to see what's there, for later, after it rains. The forest is a big, big place. If you just stumble around, you'll be as lost as a convict. You'll never be where you need to be."

Priestess of Worms

A YOUNG woman knelt beside her stob under the long-leaf pines, slender and graceful, with long hair as black as the burn. In the endless flatwoods, in the dimness of dawn, genuflecting raven-haired at the altar of her stob and iron, she looked like some Creek priestess of worms. She was the only beautiful baiter I had seen in the Apalachicola, but her music was bestial, echoing harsh and ogreish through the dark woods. McCranie watched her for some moments through the open window of his idling truck. She was baiting a burn where he and Eddie had baited some days ago.

"See, she's getting worms over there," McCranie said. "She knows we've baited it before. She can look there and see stob holes. But see, she's still gettin' a few."

She retrieved her worms in a desultory way, knocked out her stob, and straightened to search for a better spot.

The young woman's father was one of the men McCranie wanted to recruit for his loose confederation of baiters. McCranie's plan was to try to get all the baiters together to decide what would be a fair price for a permit, and then come back to the Forest Service with a proposal. He planned to argue, further, that disabled people and folks over sixty-two should not have to buy a bait sticker.

"The black man in the crowd the other day," he told me, "the big man, Charlie Williams, is *seventy-five years old.* And slow. Very slow. I don't see why he should even have to buy a permit. I mean, even if he goes regular, he's not gon' get very many worms. Ever. You know? And he's an old man. I think he's paid his dues to the government. I think it's his turn to draw a little bit. He's probably trying to live on a little Social Security, and a little welfare, maybe around six or seven hundred dollars a month in all. Baiting, he might make another three or four hundred. Enough to *sliiiide,* you know what I mean? Just enough to slide on through."

At the same time, in McCranie's opinion, any able-bodied young baiter caught in the woods without a sticker should face serious consequences. "We've bandied about the idea that someone caught without a sticker should be kept out of the forest for a year," he said. "The worm is a renewable resource. It's going to have to be managed that way if we're going to continue on to the future."

Epilogue

A MONTH later I called the Apalachicola District Ranger Station to learn how things had turned out. The worm controversy was close to resolution, Andrew Colaninno informed me. For the past several weeks his negotiations with the baiters had occupied about a third of his time. Those talks had just concluded.

"We had a meeting yesterday to draft a new policy."

"Complicated?"

"Actually, it's pretty simple -- I think." He laughed. "Under the new policy we will issue the permit just to the person who's grunting the worms, not to the people picking them up. The guy with the steel has the permit. If the operation is so big that they have someone bringing worms to the wholesaler in a separate vehicle, then that person's going to need a permit too. This way we can control both the act of grunting and the transport of commercial quantities

of worms on national forests."

A new fee structure had been devised. The baiters had accepted a higher permit fee but were adamantly opposed to a tax per can of worms, and on this they had been accommodated. The old fee of $30 a year would be raised to $12.50 a month, or $150 annually for full-time baiters. For his side, Colaninno won agreement on an escalating fee schedule, which would eventually be adjusted by the Consumer Price Index rounded to the nearest dollar.

The baiters had argued for stiffer enforcement, and here, too, they had been accommodated. The higher annual permit fee would itself help to discourage illegal baiting. Because the permit would now exceed $100 a year, a violation would be a misdemeanor, requiring a mandatory court appearance. Instead of a $25 fine and a slap on the wrist, violators now faced a maximum penalty of $5,000 and six months in jail. McCranie had made his pitch for the disabled and the elderly, and it had been successful, Colaninno said. "Only the guy running the steel needs to have a permit. If a person is truly elderly and truly handicapped, then that's not the job they would do. Unless the old folks are sitting out there on their hands and knees runnin' that steel, which is pretty strenuous work, they should be pretty happy."

I asked the ranger whether he had come to know McCranie any better. For largely

sentimental reasons, I'd hoped the two might work out a rapprochement. I liked and admired both men, and valued what they'd taught me.

"Yeah, he's been in contact with me," the ranger said drily. "And he's pretty much in that same role as spokesman."

When I called the McCranies at home, Annette McCranie answered the phone. Baiting season was now in full swing, and she had been up since four-thirty that morning: first on a pre-dawn drive to the woods to pick up four and a half cans of bait, and then back home to cup twenty cans. (As noted, each can contains 500 worms. Each cup contains twenty.) She sounded remarkably fresh for someone who had cupped 10,000 worms that day.

"We're very satisfied," she said of the new permit arrangement. "The only person that he's requiring to have a permit is the person who's actually using the tool. So I personally would never need another one. I just go pick up the worms." The force of law now intervening between Annette and her iron seemed to cheer her considerably. Recently she had had surgery for carpal-tunnel syndrome, brought on by a lifetime of grunting and the vibration of the stob. She was still able to grunt for a short while, but then her arm would begin to bother her, and she would have to quit. Now all temptation had been eliminated by Forest Service fiat. She would have to pay a

substantial fine if she ever touched iron again and was caught.

"Things have turned around pretty much just like we wanted them," Charles McCranie said when he came to the phone. Where Annette had sounded relieved and upbeat, however, Charles sounded almost blue.

"You guys sort of won, didn't you?" I said.

"I guess. It wasn't really a win or lose thing, but we did come out like we wanted to."

I asked him if he had come to know Andrew Colaninno any better in the course of their negotiations.

"Yessir, I got to know him a little better. And I have a lot of respect for Mr. Colaninno. He has his beliefs, just like I have mine. He's willing to stand up for what he believes in, just like I am."

"Did you two learn anything from each other, do you think?"

McCranie laughed a dry, diplomatic little laugh. "He's a very intelligent man. He's very well schooled. He gave me some very good ideas. But you couldn't say we're the best of friends."

I asked if McCranie had made any progress in uniting his comrades.

"No. No. Like I tried to tell you before, it's not that kind of business."

"So there's no kind of team feeling anymore?" I asked.

"No."

This was McCranie's last word on the subject. It was just a monosyllable, but a resident of the Florida flatwoods can pack a whole hilly topography of feeling into one of those. A small wind of desolation blew through the vowel, but I heard resignation there too. McCranie had dreamed that the baiters might become a community. In his heart he had always known it would not be so.

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Illustrations by Barry Blitt

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