The Oldest Tradition
Humanity’s oldest tradition is strong at Prescott College Natural History Institute

By Toni Fleischner, Ph.D.

A number of students lean into the steep hillside above the snout of an enormous glacier valley. For the moment, though, they pay no heed to the massive muscle of ice—their attention is focused on the layers of'][1000] plants within tubular corollas of the arctic-alpine flowers at their feet. The world suddenly takes on new depth and beauty as these details emerge in tiny, significant patterns. The first instinct is of the immense northern landscape in front of them—lens and mountings, pencils on paper, rendering three dimensions onto a flat surface. Photographers explore and document the wild world around them, merging technical skill with artistic imagination.

Art students carefully observe bones laid out before them, shading contours with pencils on paper, rendering three dimensions onto a flat surface. Photographers explore and document the wild world around them, merging technical skill with artistic imagination.

While natural history inquiry can yield impressive bodies of knowledge and stores of artifacts, at its heart it is a practice—a verb, not a noun. I’ve come to describe it as the practice of falling in love with the natural world. So often when we open our eyes more widely, and tune our other senses into sharper attentiveness, we find delight and beauty that can sustain us. Natural history is, in my experience, an inherently uplifting, hopeful endeavor.

Natural history is the oldest continuous human tradition. There have never been people in the world without its practice. For most of the history of our species human survival literally depended on attentiveness to the surrounding environment with eyes, ears, heart, and hands. The term natural history actually dates back to the first encyclopedia, which was called Historia Naturalis—literally, “the story of nature”—a multi-volume compendium of everything known about the world, compiled by Pliny the Elder in the decades following the birth and death of Christ. From the outset, then, natural history was broad-based and interdisciplinary.

As centuries passed, the realm of natural history narrowed and focused on the more strictly scientific forms of inquiry, forming the empirical basis for biological and ecological sciences, for geology, and for cultural anthropology. Darwin’s astute observations in the field, and the Scarcy of Higher Education about the importance of maintaining natural history’s place at the center of the liberal arts, but it remained unheralded by most institutions.

Throughout these cultural shifts, too other educational institutions have been more steadfast in their commitment and dedication to natural history than Prescott College. Natural history has been part of the teaching and learning every single day of that College’s history. Today, by rough estimate, more than a third of PC faculty are naturalists of one sort or another. It’s doubtful whether any other college comes close to a percentage that high. And a lot of distinguished natural history alumni would run to many pages.

People affiliated with Prescott College—faculty, alumni, current students, staff, and Board members—have been at the center of a new national movement to revitalize natural history. And so Prescott College is now getting recognized for what it has been doing exceedingly well all along. Highly regarded government biologists, for example, have publicly proclaimed that Prescott College graduates are some of the only people they can find for field work—competent individuals who know how to live in the field, how to identify flora and fauna, and how to think critically. All skills fostered by the practice of natural history, and by Prescott College.

A separate NGO, the Natural History Network (NHN) was founded in 2006, to facilitate a national conversation about the importance of revitalizing natural history and restoring it to its rightful place at the center of natural science, education, and healthy culture. Among the people standing in that room was a staff officer for the National Science Foundation, who felt this work was critical, and encouraged the submission of a proposal. A few months later, Josh Tewksbury, Dr. Kirsten Rowell ’96, and I wrote and received the National Science Foundation grant. A few months later, we organized an interactive symposium titled A Renaissance of Natural History in Human Ecology at the annual conference of the Society for Human Ecology in 2008. The following year Josh Tewksbury, another was the president of the Society for Human Ecology, who, in his address on the lamentable demise of natural history in academia, singled out Prescott College as “one of the only places getting it right.”

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Each session of the Natural History Initiative gatherings focused on a particular aspect of natural history’s role: society, education, research, and management. Participants included people whose names you read in textbooks, as well as less known practitioners of natural history. Poets and painters, biologists and psychologists, teachers and land managers engaged in animated discussion—on everything from the space race, and advances in genetics pushed aside attention to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy.” Simply put, natural history is the practice of paying attention.

loss of natural history training. A dozen years ago two of the most respected biologists in the United States wrote an urgent plea in the Chronicles of Higher Education about the importance of maintaining natural history’s place at the center of the liberal arts, but it remained unheralded by most institutions.

In academia, natural history came to be seen as antiquated and unimportant, and irrelevant to the modern world. It has been increasingly marginalized, a relic of past ages, a vestige of the more expansive definition: “a practice of intentional, focused attentiveness to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy.” Simply put, natural history is the practice of paying attention.

During the 20th century, natural history inquiry fell out of favor in academia, faced waves of antipathy and hostility, and was largely considered an anachronism. The rise of modernism, combined with the rise of population control, created an atmosphere of scientific naivety, where the importance of maintaining natural history’s place at the center of the liberal arts, but it remained unheralded by most institutions.

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