Confessions of a Child Ecologist

by

Sam Aurelius Milam III
c/o 4984 Peach Mountain Drive
Gainesville, Georgia 30507

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caveat lector

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My interest in ecology goes back to my childhood. As a budding naturalist (as they were called back then), I brought home the normal things: birds, rabbits, snakes, cactus plants. Most of my menagerie fared rather well under my tender ministrations and the tolerant acquiescence of my parents. I do recall one exception from which I learned an important lesson about the difference between assistance and meddling. I fear that this lesson remains unlearned even today by many people.

The slightly hilly terrain around my southeast Texas home was at that time in the midst of a years long drought, and the reservoirs and power plant of today were only a twinkle in some engineer's eye. The summers were long, hot, and dry, and the winters were not nearly as wet as they should have been. However, such winter rain as there was left a few wide, shallow puddles, usually on the hard shoulders along the roads. Water on the ground was a blessing, and puddles were for playing in. We could run through them, ride our bicycles through them, throw rocks into them, and we didn't miss a chance. The puddles, it turned out, were also a blessing for the local toads, and every spring those puddles were filled to capacity with tadpoles. Incidentally, we were very careful with the bicycles.

Tadpoles, at that point in my life, had been an occasional hobby for several years. I had tried to "raise tadpoles" from the time I was old enough to catch them and persuade Grandma to loan me her garbage can lid for them to live in. However, unlike my relatively successful efforts with pigeons and sparrows, my tadpoles always died. There was one bunch (herd? school?) that was freshly caught and active at the end of one summer vacation at Grandma's house in Wharton, and I was forced to leave them in her care when I returned home to San Antonio. When I asked her later, she claimed they had all "grown up and hopped away". That was probably a generous fiction intended to ease the burdens of a worried child, and perhaps avoid the need for painful explanations. However, in the spring of my eleventh year, I saw my chance to make my mark in the world of tadpoles.

The spring puddles, as I mentioned, were filled each year to capacity with happy, healthy, wiggling tadpoles. The only problem was that as the long pleasant (and warm) spring days passed, the size (and the capacity) of the puddles diminished rapidly. To make matters worse, that happened while the tadpoles were getting larger. What began as a pleasant puddle full of tadpoles gradually became, before my very eyes, a sort of miniature horror of overcrowding and starvation. It wasn't possible for the tadpoles to mature and leave the puddle fast enough to offset their growth within a dwindling environment. Although it may be a classic example of survival, at the time it was quite distressing. I'd observed the situation for several previous years, and on the day of which I speak, I decided the time had come for action.

Had my project ended successfully, I'd surely give my brother the credit he deserves. However, I'll say simply that I enlisted Tommy's aid. After surveying the available puddles, considering distance, size, apparent health of the tadpole population, and whatever else appeared important at the time, we selected a puddle upon whose

lucky inhabitants we would bestow our generosity. We then made many trips with old tuna cans, rescuing lucky tadpoles from certain death. Behind one of the sheds in which my father stored a lifetime collection of junk was an old kitchen sink. This we filled with water, and in it we placed the tadpoles. When the tadpole evacuation was complete and the sanctuary was fully stocked, we rested briefly from our labors, regretting the many millions of tadpoles that we couldn't save, yet fulfilled with the knowledge that we had done our best.

We recognized that by removing the tadpoles from their natural habitat, we'd assumed responsibility for their survival. For that reason we soon began a search for something to feed them. Remember that with my long interest in tadpoles, I had some experience in this area. Thus it was only a matter of thirty minutes or so before we returned to the tadpole sanctuary to feed our flock. For the tadpoles, it had been a very long thirty minutes. Neither Tommy nor I could think of anything constructive to suggest concerning the mysterious disappearance of so many tadpoles in so short a time. We could only stand and stare at the sink filled with water, but no tadpoles, and ponder.

When we heard the familiar (and suddenly significant) quack of one of my father's many ducks, we realized that we hadn't foreseen all of the possibilities. The duck waddled up to the sink, took another sip, cast us an inquisitive glance, and waddled away. As Poppa used to say, it's an ill wind that blows nobody good, yet we hadn't intended to feed the ducks, but to save the tadpoles.