

Dispatch from the Plant Underground

Dispatch 7: Invasive exotics

7 August, 2010



Checkered Keelback

Dear friends,

Thank you again to everyone who's written to me in the last few days. I continue to feel encouraged and happy that these dispatches are read by so many, and that they are playing their part in a magical web being spun between so many of us, by so many spiders with their spinnerets and their invisible silk that is stronger than steel!.

I know some of you have difficulties with spiders, but I do love them!

I've just come in from a sunning session at the kitchenside pond with a Checkered Keelback snake. I sat two feet away from him for 10 minutes or so, and he just lay there, his beautiful

glossy brown body arranged in a figure of 8 on a bed of loops. Tasha (dog) came running by and he just lay there. Leela (human) came walking by and he just lay there. Crimson dragonflies flashed past his nose and he just lay there. Fish came right up to the water's edge, touching him almost, and he just lay there. I inched closer and closer and he just lay there.

The warmth was just so lovely! It was really nice to be sunning alongside a snake, to be catching some light and heat together, two long brown bodies side by side, after these dark and wet days with very heavy rainfall. I wished I could curl up like him, and be as quiet, as still, just watching all the others darting around. There was a lot of activity. It looks like many of us had the same impulse, suncatching! Violet-blue damselflies, bluebottle and peacock butterflies; drongoes and woodpeckers, grasshoppers.

Great morning to wash clothes and hang them out in the light breeze!

Today, I am thinking about other worlds, other possibilities, and about this smashed and broken world, and hubris, and I'm mentally doodling my way through an essay I've been wanting to write for awhile. In fact I thought about all this while pulling out *Eupatorium* weeds on the main track this morning (FAQ 1: what is a weed? FAQ 2: what is an invasive weed?!).

I was asking aloud (the dogs were there, as were some young trees and a lot of birds), how do you get rid of invasive weeds (read: entrenched and spreading destructive forces), on the land, in society, in your mind?

Well, one strategy is to pull them out, by the roots! Not once, or twice but again and again and again! Until they are all gone! Or until they start to behave themselves! This is what one would do with *Eupatorium*, pull it out by its roots, before it sets seed, or cut it down before it flowers.

Other people may have other strategies with weeds, (read: destructive forces, things out of control, monster problems that look so innocent at first). I think Sandy, Wolfgang and I have very different approaches with these.

The best would really be to have a wholesome and healthy place, diverse and dynamic, with lots of space and time to grow and be resilient. Invasive weeds don't normally enter such places. But these diverse, whole and dynamic places are very very rare now.

The next best would be to not let invasive weeds (or invasive anything: advertisements, pollutants, certain behaviours, thoughts etc) loose at all. Just don't let them out in the first place. This is very important, but almost never happens, because the destructive nature of things is not

apparent in the beginning, is not visible to all, even if it is to some. Also, things often behave one way at home, and another way elsewhere.

Or, once the thing is out, deal with it early, i.e. nip it in the bud. Another way of saying this would be to catch it upstream at its source and not downstream. All these mean you have to be able to see it early, in its nascent stages. This means again, you have to learn to see many things in the first place, to discern.

Or, focus your energies on something different, such as stop the burning of tropical forests, the destruction of habitat, industrial scale plantations, cattle ranching, mining, take out the dams (and don't build any more), let the rivers flow. Any of these would be a very far reaching action, and if achieved, might make the whole issue of weeds quite irrelevant.

Or, find the point with maximum leverage, as some very wise people have said, which in the case of weeds (and a whole lot of other things), would be to stop this entire culture of consumption.

Now, we will all wonder, I certainly wonder all the time, where do you stop this? Can it be stopped?

Some declare it can't be stopped: it's in the nature of things. Others say it must be stopped, the longer you delay the worse it gets. Some fear this whole question of stopping, ending: they fear the suffering. Others are ready to suffer, because the suffering will be worse the longer you leave it.

For instance, the question of Roundup has come up in our discussions on the weed *Wedelia* (a pretty yellow flowered exotic). The debate was: do we use a non-persistent poison to kill it completely, and quickly on the land? Or do we pull it out, and spare the water from the runoff? Then someone said, what's the point of using a defoliant, when actually the stem stays alive and sprouts again. So should we just use lots of hands, pull it out systematically and thoroughly and burn it?

Anyway, the gentle approach was used. Teams of people went out to weed, several rounds of pulling out and clearing were done. And the uprooted *Wedelia* was burnt (Sandy says it burns well).

For some time there was peace. But today, two years later, walk around the land, and look outside, and you will see that we are surrounded by *Wedelia* on every side. In fact The Western Ghats are being overrun by *Wedelia*, reported only some 12 years ago for the first time in Kerala.

I see it everywhere, and the sight of it along all our roadsides makes my stomach churn. It seems to me *Wedelia* mocks our puny efforts, our kindnesses, our delicate strategies, our local sensibilities, our care for the water and the soil and people drinking downstream.

The thing is, it's really important to not speculate too long. Because, as Sandy reminded me, with respect to *Wedelia*, the consequences for the land, for ecology, for people are hazardous with this pretty looking herbaceous weed. *Wedelia* is really threatening, a portent of bad times to come. The awful thing is that we have to make choices which are not really choices at all, we are forced to choose between poisoning the water, harming the land, upsetting the ecology with delay tactics. Whatever we do we are doomed, it seems.

I think one must address the weeds in one's head and one's life and the land together, and also in the gargantuan machinery that imposes it on a global scale with its military and political and cultural drivers. I do think upstream is a better place to start, the source. I do also think, the more of us who do it, whether we pull out *Wedelia*, turn education on its head, welcome back native species, or oppose military and corporate invasion of any kind, or speak out, the better. But for this, we need to talk to each other.

There are so many strategies, depending on who you are and what you see. Depending on scale and place and time. Large scale invasion may require some brutal hacking back. Small scale invasion, may be a far more delicate operation. Time is a huge factor. The longer you leave it the worse it definitely gets in the case of invasive weeds.

Unlike nature, where, the longer you leave it, the better it gets.

Weeding has some great lessons to offer here. I really like it!

I spy on my desk today some books whose authors I have a personal connection with, authors who have deeply influenced me, who have turned my life in critical ways. I've been re-reading them, engaging with their thought quite intensely since a few days. I feel today is a good day to introduce you all to them, as I am so immersed in their work right now, along with the question of invasive weeds. They are all part of this place or my life or thinking in one way or another.

Before doing this I want to just mention that the list of close friends doing exceptional work is quite long! I'd like to be able to introduce everyone in a spontaneous way, whenever it seems appropriate, as the nature of this dispatch is to do with observations, work and thoughts from the day.

Each of these four author-friends shines a startling and very clear light on the state of things, on

the world as is today, (as has been for 10,000 years), on human nature, on nature. All four also talk about hubris, ending hubris, bringing the machinery of insanity to an end, whether it is in your head, in your heart, in your family, in your community or in your world. All talk about roots of the crisis, all address this question in radical ways, radical language, radical action (and I am using this word as in: original, fundamental, as in: root). And all have lived it, or live it (in very very different ways!).

For those of you who can't see the connection between all of them or wonder how I mention them all in one breath, well, just think of it like this for now: they (or their work), are among the friends I reach to (other than the forest) when I want to examine things very deeply. I also want to make it clear that it's not about agreeing necessarily with every thing that has been said by any of them, but about engaging very closely with the issues they articulate, a few of which I've just mentioned, and the core ones being: seeing/listening, love and action.

I also want to say these are not the only people I know with these concerns, there are many others. But three of these friends can be found through Amazon.com!

Arundhati Roy needs no introduction. But it may be that one or more of you have not read her work. Please read *God of Small Things* (you'll learn about Kerala!), and please get hold of one of the following compilations of essays of hers: *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*; *Shape of the Beast*; *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*. Arundhati has been big sister to me and great support in very many ways. When I want to know what's going on in the world, I don't turn on the news, or snatch the headlines from the Indian Express, I call her and ask where she's been and what she sees. Her work and our friendship, as with the others I mention here today, are part of my journey into seeing and listening. And love, and action.

J. Krishnamurti: sage, philosopher, educator. I met K (as he was often called) several times when a student of Rishi Valley and Brockwood Park in the 80s, the years just before he died. I think of him sometimes as one of the kindest persons I've ever known and at other times as an out and out revolutionary, one that cannot be categorized simplistically as inner and spiritual as different from outer and activist. I think K also needs no introduction. But I've occasionally met people who've not heard of him and if you haven't, I recommend that you look through the online archive of his work or contact the Krishnamurti Foundations or the schools in America, UK and India, or the centres all over the world.

I always remember one question Krishnamurti asked us students back then. It was simply this: "what do you love?". This alone took me to nature and eventually brought me here to the Sanctuary and rooted me here. Yesterday I read him to see what he had to say about: action.

(Love and action. Seeing and action.).

Derrick Jensen, author of *Language Older than Words*, *Endgame* and *Culture of Make Believe* and many more books. I was first introduced to his thought through a young American volunteer who came by here some years ago who read my clumsy writings back then, and urged me to get hold of *Language*. Then I came across an article by him while last travelling overseas. And then, thanks to Sujata, I read *Language* in Coorg last Christmas. And since then Derrick and I are friends. What struck me was the incredible reach of Derrick's writing, from exquisite details of the natural world to the manifestation of abuse, violence and insanity at every level of human society. Please visit Derrick's website www.derrickjensen.org and please do read *Language*, *Endgame* and *Culture*. With Derrick, the same questions speak to me: What do you love? What is listening? What is action?

Wolfgang Theuerkauf is the only one who might need an introduction. Not many people know Wolfgang exists. Sometimes he too forgets he exists (as a human). Sometimes it seems, he thinks he is a plant. Somedays I too think he is a plant, a tree perhaps. A tree around whom so many of us have lived, grown, and found a niche. A banyan tree, home to so many creatures big and small, a tree who can grow on and on, whether there is a central structure or not.

Wolfgang is the author of this place, *The Sanctuary*, this rustling, squeaking, whirring, living compendium of human and non-human beings. Of all, this is the book I am most intimate with, it surrounds me and talks to me and tells me things all the time, and is ever present in my imagination, my dreams, my thought, in this animate-body, in our community. This book never lets me forget what it means *to be alive*.

He, the author, came in and talked to me a few minutes ago in his rubber boots, faded lungi, torn shirt, wearing a forlorn look about the monsoon.

Most days Wolfgang is to be found at the bottom of the garden or on some far off hillside. He doesn't write, hasn't had to since I came here, but he likes to tell stories. He definitely has a muse who speaks through his work and life in a way that still delights me (as it puzzles and confounds), even after 17 years. And this muse, through this living breathing compendium of the Sanctuary, asks the same questions: on love, seeing and action.

Would you like to know more from him directly? You won't find anything by him on Amazon, but you could read these dispatches, or better still come here! The garden is the only place where you can actually read him, whether or not you meet him!

Wolfgang's thought will go to the world through the plants and seeds and growing forests,

through the birds and insects that fly from here, through fern and fungal spores, through the spring water from the hillside, through the children and youngsters who swing by, through the oldest channels of communication: attention, empathy and understanding. And maybe just maybe, through a scribe, but very slowly. I think it will take another 20 years or so, before it gets written down!

Well, having come this far, I might as well mention Bob Dylan, he's on my desk too. Lives here, inside the computer, by my bed, in the shelves, in my head and some other heads. He is also outside under the shrubs and trees. I keep hearing him all over the garden!

This mystic garden and its watchtower and its chimes of freedom, in a world gone wrong where everything is broken, with its pitiful immigrants and lonesome hobos and working men and rainy day women, all serving somebody, while it's thunderin' on the mountain, and the hard rain's about to fall!!!!

Bobbie does have a line for just about everything, doesn't he? I can't really talk about him here, I'm not friends with him. I also don't really know about love and action with him! Not yet!

But I can tell you about Mark Edwards and the *Hard Rain Project* which is endorsed by Dylan. Mark is also a dear friend of mine! Check out HR meanwhile through Google, or visit the website, www.hardrainproject.com. More about Mark and his work another time.

I have a long list of special people and plants to share with you! I have some incredible gardener-friends and educator-friends (and plant-friends) in mind for the next dispatches.

Some practical thoughts on these mailings. From what I can make out, the mailing circle with its sub circles is now perhaps about 1000 (my three lists and other people's lists). I haven't had connectivity to do the admin work on all these contacts and merge them into a single dispatch-mailing list, but that's approximately the number it's gone to so far.

I am aware there may be some who don't wish to receive the dispatch at all or to receive it so often. My thinking today is to narrow the list down to the folks I know for sure would like to get these as they are written. It is wonderful for me to write like this, it is very special knowing real

friends are at the other end of these missives. But I don't want to impose these letters on anyone, friends and others! The beauty, really, lies in the connection, in the conversation between friends! I will anyway post it also through Facebook. The compiled dispatches are available as pdf files.

Btw, it can be *dispatch* or *despatch* according to Mr. Chambers. I prefer the former. A few of you say it makes you think of military, or the frontlines of battle. Well, we are on the frontline of something here, certainly at the edge of the forest it feels like we are.

Ask the plants who are wiped out by *Wedelia*, they certainly feel the looming threat. Or the elephants who are cornered, or the bees who are going blind and dying. Or the fish turning belly up in the rivers. Do you know how many species went extinct today? Derrick Jensen says 130. That's grounds enough to know that something very very awful and destructive is going on.

I was deliberate in the use of the word dispatch. I think of it as something sent out from any place where urgency is deeply felt, and thus sent away *in haste*, which itself, could mean "rash" or "an urgency calling for speed"!

Until next time,

Take care,

Suprabha.....

