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WE ARE STARDUST

CAN MANKIND AND NATURE EVER LIVE IN PEACE?
AN INTERVIEW WITH ALASTAIR MCINTOSH.

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It's a painful reality, but our love for nature could be hastening its demise. We ride mountains and catch waves, dominating and possessing what we should respect. But there is a better way, says Scottish academic, Alastair McIntosh. Writing, lecturing and campaigning about the interconnection between human societies and the environments they inhabit, he is at the forefront of an increasingly important exploration of hope in an apparently hopeless ecological situation. HUCK caught up with the professor and asked him to confirm or deny our instinctive assertion that surfers just might be able to save the world.

HUCK: The way outdoor pursuits like surfing and snowboarding are packaged encourages the sort of consumption that is ultimately detrimental to the very environment those sports depend upon. How can we live with this?

ALASTAIR MCINTOSH: It's fine when you have, for example, one surfboard, but it becomes problematic when the equipment we use, the clothes we wear for the enjoyment of nature, become bound up in consumerism. I have no problem with a certain amount of consumption

for a dignified life. But blatant consumerism encourages people to gear up for the latest bit of kit and creates the desire for the latest fashion, the newest thing. When this happens it becomes deeply problematic and it's difficult to know what to do about it. As someone who works on magazines you will be deeply aware of the contradictions, because it is advertising that pays for the magazines that inspire people to discover the beauty of nature in the first place. As a bottom line, however, I think we need to slow down the pace at which we churn out and consume these products in order to try and live efficiently with what we've already got.

Can our encounters with nature lead to genuinely transcendent experiences – or are the mountains and the ocean just one more thing for us to consume until the point of depletion?

I'm reminded of a quote I heard recently that said, "You won't find many postmodernists on a mountain." You know, there's a very strange breed of academic in postmodern circles that has this crazy idea that nature is a social construction. They have this idea that

it is urban people who decide what nature will be, and that any experience with nature is just like that with any other commodity, something to be bought or sold. People who love nature do often experience a kind of transcendence, in other words an experience that takes them out of 'normal' modes of consciousness. By interrelating with nature and experiencing fire, air, earth and water in a very elemental and visceral way, the crust of our hardened, civilised veneer gets blasted off. You realise that you've not 'gone outside' into nature. Rather, you've 'gone inside' into nature and yourself. And when you've been up against it out in the wilds, you realise that there is absolutely no question that you are part of a wild nature, and if you get things wrong, there is a potential for really coming unstuck that's more than any social construction. To me, there's something mind-blowing about that. It's the utter antidote to virtual reality and all forms of pretentiousness.

Do you believe that experiencing that sort of transcendence could ever prompt mankind to sit up and take responsibility for the natural world?



Well, like I say, a lot of people are living in a world that's become a kind of virtual reality. Food turns up and we don't have much of an idea where it comes from or whether it's been produced in ways consistent with social justice and ecological sustainability. 'Nature raw in tooth and claw' is very far removed from our day-to-day lives and so we've even lost connection with death, and the wisdom it can point towards. But when we go into nature that virtual world is stripped away. We experience the wild, and, if you're properly equipped and respectful, it's not scary. And that's really important because nature teaches us what human nature is all about.

Dr Robert Greenway of the Olympic Ecopsychology Institute in the States has written of his experience of taking students out into nature with as little contact with the outside world as possible for as long as practically possible. What he finds is that the students often experience transcendence. They feel, when out there together in the wilderness, that the boundaries of their egos dissolve. With that comes experiences of interconnection between the environment and one another. To think of oneself as part of nature is then no longer

abstract – it's an experienced metaphysical reality. Such states are often deeply blissful, meaningful and rich with love. In my opinion these things are hugely important, because they give us empirical evidence that there may be a spiritual underpinning to reality, a profound interconnection with all that there is. And you know, if one person experiences interconnection between nature and reality it can be treated as an aberration. But when these sorts of transcendent, or 'peak experiences' as they are sometimes known, can be shown to be fairly common, as is the case, then it really pushes our intellects to face the question: Might there be layers within our consciousness that could take us to depths of interconnection that we'd never imagined?

Do you empathise with the notion that surfing can allow us to encounter nature on a spiritual level? Strip away the city, and you get down to the level of elemental, raw nature. And that's a powerful process. It's what drives the waves and winds and planets and stars. But what's really interesting is that people often experience it not as an inanimate physical force, but as a physical

reality that's driven, dare one say it, ultimately by the power of love. And you see it shining through in the sparkle of dew on the grass, in the wild geese reaching to heaven, and the never-ending ebb and flow of the tides. I think that's what it really means to surf. The bit you need a board for is only the start. The wave is only the kindergarten that provides your first thrill. The surfing I'm talking about doesn't need all the trappings of consumerism, because you learn to leave the board behind. You know, the whole of nature just becomes more and more of a trip. And I'll tell you something, I've only ever paddled with a board and body surfed, but I've got friends who are great surfers. And in the wee hours of the night, with a good dram in hand, there's not one of them who wouldn't vibe with what I'm saying here. The real surf bums know that it's *all* a spiritual experience.

As they put it at Woodstock, "We are stardust, we are golden, and we've got to make it back to the garden." ●

ALASTAIR MCINTOSH'S LATEST BOOK, *HELL OR HIGH WATER: CLIMATE CHANGE, HOPE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION*, PUBLISHED BY BIRLINN, IS AVAILABLE NOW.