Thoughts on being a Naturalist

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I just finished reading Eric Mills' "Audubon in Nova Scotia" published by Gaspereau Press (2018) and it reminded me how being a Naturalist has changed over time. Though this work is taken from Audubon's diary and primarily describes his short journey through Nova Scotia in 1833, it is clear that Audubon, the naturalist, was a collector of specimens. Being a naturalist at that time (the 1800's) was very much about collecting specimens whether of birds, bird eggs, mammals, plants, etc. There was no major concern for the human impact on the environment although people like Thoreau, Muir, and Seton certainly were attuned to the devastation caused by humans.

The desire by some to kill animals still exists as trophy hunting, and this seems more of a western value which, fortunately, is waning being decried by the general public. I must admit that when I was young, I did like to collect animals. I would pin insects, put fish and amphibians in alcohol and I made study skins of small mammals. Indeed, when I came to Acadia and became acquainted with Cyril Coldwell, former curator of the Wildlife Museum in the Biology Department he would often state that to make an absolute determination of a species you should have it in hand (i.e., dead). Luckily, nowadays the desire to "capture" wildlife whether animals, plants or fungi the camera has become the preferred method of choice. This is not to say that natural history museums and collections have become outdated. We still only know a fraction of all species on earth, but collection needs to be more thoughtful.

Being a naturalist means that you have a passion for a specific group of organisms such as birds, insects or just beetles, plants, mushrooms or any other group for that matter. Or you may just like the outdoors and have an affinity to all life. Common is the characteristic that naturalists like to be in the outdoors. Being a naturalist also means that one is more aware of the beauty and indeed spiritual aspect of being in nature. Spending time in the outdoors observing nature generally implies that one is mindful of the impact of humans on nature. When we drive around Nova Scotia to visit a special or favourite site we see increasingly new clearcuts on the landscape. In other areas, the forests we see may look beautiful to the untrained eye, but we

realize that increasingly forests are mainly young composed of early succession trees such as red maple and balsam fir. When we see new housing developments, we understand the loss of habitat for wildlife. When we hear of right whales found dead in the waters, we realize that yet another species is on the brink of extinction. When we hear that there has been a global decline of insects we can immediately make the link to a decrease in insectivorous aerial birds. When we hear of the hemlock woolly adelgid (a microscopic insect) and the emerald ash borer (a beetle) now present in Nova Scotia, we lament the impending loss of hemlock and ash but realize that we are to blame through human-caused global climate change and human transport of exotic species. Recognizing these human effects on nature should compel us to speak up!

Many (most?) people live in cities and only occasionally spend time in nature, and to them, it may just be hearsay that many species are slowly driven to extinction let alone that there are significant impacts to landscapes. Driving around Nova Scotia, the vast clearcuts are often not visible from highways due to narrow buffer strips hiding what the landscape looks like. But we are all impacted by the loss of species, the change to landscapes and climate change. Wildfires destroying communities, hurricanes leveling tracts of land and flooding are only some examples of the effects. Loss of species means significant changes to ecosystems, but these may not be felt yet, but when we see trees dying due to the invasion of foreign species, that we experience. Think of all the elm trees that are now largely gone or the spindly beech trees gnarled by the beech canker fungus. Should we just sit back and accept these changes or should we speak up? It is like the frog placed in cold water which is slowly heated. The frog swims around and is apparently non-responsive to the increasing temperature, but eventually, it dies. Had the frog been put into warm water, which it survived when slowly heated, it would have immediately jumped out. We, humans, tend to be non-responsive to the slow degradation of our environment but we should know better – we need to act now to prevent the "slow death" awaiting us.

I therefore advocate that we naturalists, lovers of nature, need to be proactive. We need to promote our passion for the natural environment. We need to spread our love for nature and promote an ethic where we are a part of and sustained by nature rather than the dominant view that nature is there for our exploitation.

With this in mind, I plan, in the new year, to start a second monthly meeting of the BNS where we explore the various environmental/conservation issues that face us. It is easy to

become discouraged and depressed when hearing for example that 60% of all living organisms have disappeared over the last forty years as reported in the WWF Living Planet Report for 2018. However, we must remain optimistic that we, as individuals, can through local action have a positive impact and turn this trend around. But how do we do that? Well, this is what I would like to explore collectively.