

I saw a nomad, and it was me

AS I read over the papers contained in this symposium on dispersive fauna, four apparently completely unrelated images came to mind.

First, is an extraordinary, and famous, photo of a refugee Afghan girl from a 1985 cover of National Geographic magazine. She is staring into the camera with wide green eyes (<http://magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/afghangirl/>). Her expression and body language all project an image of fear, of a desperate need to escape, and of impending threat in her world. The immediate threat is likely the photographer, who was male and wielding a device about which she would have little understanding (a camera). But the image portrays a much grander sense of doom, which in her world at the time involved political instability, alien invaders (Russians), and imminent disaster.

I once saw that face. I retain the image as a momentary flash on the road through the Khyber Pass, a route that has been used for centuries by nomadic tribes to move between high and low grazing country. My image is of a girl herding goats, who glared at me as we drove by. She was a member of a tribe locally called G/Koochie. Such tribes have been living in the central Asian regions for centuries. Their medieval culture and way of life have survived frequent and terrible persecution, changes in

geopolitical boundaries, shifts in climate and related resource availability, and the technological revolution of the last century (Fig. 1). It is a culture characterized by resilience and flexibility, yet is bounded by extraordinary resistance to change. These people live their lives as residents of something akin to Middle Earth. They barely exist in our world, because they are ephemeral in time and space. Second, is the image of young Australasians overseas. Overseas Experience (OE) has been a rite of passage for young people for generations, supported originally by travel to the major wars of the 20th century, and more recently by the improving accessibility of international transport. The process involves heading overseas in early adulthood with vague purpose and less money. Those doing it (and few do not) follow the same pathways, stay in the same cheap hostels, and work in the same jobs. Utilizing a principle reminiscent of the Green Beard effect, they can generally be found congregating in mobs close to sources of warmth and alcohol. It is the similarity of their experiences and pathways that is noteworthy here.

Most people on OE eventually return home after a nomadic existence lasting from a few months to a few years. Having discovered that home is actually one of the nicest places on



Fig. 1. A K/Goochie girl herds donkeys across a grazing commons in downtown Kabul.

earth, most stay close for much of the rest of their lifetime, preferring to focus resources on creating a secure and reliable environment for family and children.

The third image is of my partner. While breeding is likely to be very far from the minds of people on OE, the reality is that within a relatively short time of returning home, breeding is what they are most likely to do. Some people on OE meet a life partner from elsewhere, and are then faced with the challenge of luring them home. But for many, the question of where a culturally mixed pairing should live is avoided by following through on the Green Beard effect. I met the partner with whom I now have two children in Switzerland. But we grew up 30 km apart in Central North Island, New Zealand.

The fourth image is of Lake Eyre, in northern South Australia. Although normally dry, as I write this, the lake is full (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200703/s1866774.htm>). When it fills, it attracts enormous numbers of birds which feed on the abundant food resources that appear whenever the lake holds water. The lake is an important ephemeral resource, and probably holds the key to the success of several dispersive bird species.

The girl in the photo has apparently lived the hard and unhappy life projected by that image. Her wanderings lasted for 10 years, before she returned to a home that she likely could barely remember. She is a Pashtoon, a member of a tribe that is not normally nomadic. For her, nomadism was the only available response to a crisis of circumstance. Part of the attraction of her story is the extraordinary lengths that National Geographic went to to find her for the follow up article (reference above). Individual nomads are, by their nature, not easy to find, and she was already a nomad when originally photographed.

Young Australasians on OE are not responding to a crisis, but they are similarly driven to escape

from their local environs. That escape will supply the perspective needed to return home and find happiness in local things. Without it, that happiness may be difficult to achieve. Many return home accompanied by a partner who, while found overseas, is actually a relatively local product. Nomadic wanderings may even encourage local mate choice. After all, if everyone is doing it, then you are more likely to meet a compatible (and local!) partner in the mobs gathering in Greece, Spain or London, than in a pub close to home.

The point of all this storytelling is that nomads exist as a subculture amongst us, but we routinely either ignore them or do not even realize that they exist. Most of us had a dispersive phase during young adulthood, with characteristics driven by anticipated resource availability elsewhere — a Lake Eyre that would surely appear to sustain us while overseas. Despite those personal experiences, our ignorance of nomadism as an ecological lifestyle is spelled out clearly in the article by Gilmore *et al.* (this issue) who show convincingly that nomads only rarely attract the attention of legislators looking to protect endangered species. Even if they are acknowledged, supplying any needed protection is difficult. Nomads ignore geopolitical boundaries. They chase ephemeral resources. And most of the time, they are *somewhere else* and therefore do not attract attention.

Nomadism is an evolutionary lifestyle in a world where resources occur unreliably. As Driscoll (this issue) points out, it therefore deserves recognition and protection as an evolutionary strategy. In a world of changing weather patterns and increased desertification, it may even become the lifestyle of choice for any that are adaptable enough to embrace it.

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