

In and out of Africa



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Guttural roars and the cracking of bone drown out any sound of the river, which by this time of year has slowed to a mere trickle. On its banks, blood-soaked muzzles plunge into fallen prey as if it were their final meal. Bulbous bellies - stretched into submission - compel the satiated lions into comically ignoble pose; on their backs with paws to the hot afternoon sun. This is the African experience I could only imagine, one born of National Geographic fantasy.



Precious water in a mercilessly dry environment

However, it also became a stunning reality for me this autumn. Longing to broaden my understanding of nature and to satisfy a relentless wanderlust, I eagerly accepted the invitation to collaborate with University of California scientists in East Africa. So, while October saw me sharing streams with bears and salmon in the Great Bear Rainforest, the next month I was bouncing along in a dusty Land Cruiser among lions and giraffes that roam this strikingly different ecosystem.

And how very different it was from our Great Bear. An ancient landscape nurtures an astonishing variety of large mammals, many more than hide under our rainforest canopies. And unlike our eternally drenched wildlife, the East African fauna live a life that swings between the poverty of the dry season and the fleeting bounty brought by the rains.

There are also remarkable similarities. For one, the famous migration of the Serengeti Wildebeest parallels that of our annual salmon runs. Both transform the wilderness seasonally and draw in carnivores and scavengers from afar. The other similarity, no less spectacular but lacking the beauty, is a seemingly frantic rush for natural resources by human beings.

What struck me most about Tanzania, however, are the safeguards against such threats that the government has thoughtfully installed over the last several decades. About a third of Tanzania receives

some form of meaningful protection, far exceeding efforts in BC or anywhere else in North America. National parks, marine protected areas and game reserves provide tangible refuges for nature. Although not perfect, such foresight has also created a thriving conservation economy based on eco-tourism. It's a strategy BC would be wise to adopt.

When I greet the emerging sedges on rain coast estuaries this spring, I'll bring my African experiences with me. My thoughts will be increasingly global, but the contributions I intend to make are passionately local. The Great Bear Rainforest has been my home, my classroom, and my place of worship. And it remains so. I'll no doubt have the privilege to return to Africa, but most of my future safaris will be in the rainforests of home.



Hungry cubs share a meal with Uncle Tom cat



Queen of the Savannah