SHE RUNS WITH WOLVES

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Deep within the labyrinth of the Department of Interior, down one of the side canyons that radiate off the main hallway, is the Office of the Director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Thirteen people have occupied this Office; their portraits hang in the entryway. Twelve are men in suits with serious expressions. The thirteenth is a woman wearing waders, standing in an icy Alaskan river, holding a pair of binoculars. Looming in the background, not more than a hundred yard dash away, is a Kodiak brown bear, largest *ursine* in the world, top carnivore in the local food chain, looking annoyed. The woman, on the other hand, is smiling broadly, savoring at once the beauty and danger of the moment. Her expression seems to say, "Is this a great job or what?" The woman is Mollie Beattie.

Mollie was a mold breaker. First woman to head the male-dominated "hook and bullet" culture of the "FWS." One of the first to crack the gender barrier of the forestry profession. Outward Bound instructor. Hardy homesteader: with husband Rick she cut a road, cleared a patch of land, built a solar-heated house on a south-facing slope, and set up housekeeping amidst beech and maple, black bear and fishercat, hard by the state forest that now bears her name in Grafton, Vermont. Instead of a TV, she hung a painting of a woman standing with her hand on an oak tree, leaves spilling out of her mouth, titled "A Woman Who Speaks Trees." Could have been a self portrait.

I met Mollie in 1987, when Governor Madeleine Kunin appointed me Commissioner of the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation. Mollie was then Commissioner of Forests, Parks and Recreation, having pried open yet another male bastion. We started out as colleagues, sharing the frustrations of fellow public servants, frequent targets of outrageous slings and arrows, some from behind. We discovered a real kinship: we both preferred being out in the woods to sitting in legislative committee rooms; we both had a passion for saving things, especially the "little things that run the world," as E.O. Wilson puts it; we both took our jobs, but not ourselves, seriously. But we differed in one fundamental respect: politics. Nothing of any consequence can be accomplished without politics, of course. We both knew that. But I could never quite get the hang of it—a fatal case of foot-in-mouth disease, I'm afraid—whereas Mollie, though just as put off by the sometimes shabby nature of it all, nevertheless was able to stick with it, improve her game, and in time come

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to relish it—not for what it did for her but for what she could do with it. That probably explains why she went on to become Director of the largest wildlife conservation agency in the world and I wound up in academia. But we stayed friends.

As FWS Director, Mollie took on the thankless task of defending the Endangered Species Act, my favorite statute, against a furious political attack from the "Contract With America" crowd, busy spreading lies and disinformation (see, there I go again) into every corner of America. Mollie got her first taste of what this fight was going to be like when she testified before the House Resources (formerly "Natural Resources") Committee, chaired by that estimable gentleman from Alaska, Don Young. Brandishing a baculum—that's the penis bone of a walrus, in case you didn't know—the Chair wanted to know just what Director Beattie was going to do about the "eco-Nazis" who were running her agency. Mollie wasn't intimidated; this wasn't the first neanderthal she had run into in the world of politics. So Mollie calmly informed Congressman Young that the ESA was basically a good law, and that she intended to uphold and improve it. Did the Chair have any constructive suggestions?

Mollie got her schooling in how to handle raging testosterone while still in Vermont. The most powerful person in the Vermont Legislature in those days was the Speaker of the House, Ralph Wright. Now Ralph is basically a good guy and he pushed a lot of strong environmental laws through the legislature, but he did have a well-deserved reputation as a bully. You didn't cross Ralph, period. But that didn't scare Mollie. Once, when the Speaker wanted what amounted to a political favor, something having to do with use of state lands for commercial activity, Mollie balked. This is the people's land, she said. Yes, yes, but it's just a little favor, Ralph said. No, Mollie said. After turning purple and ranting for a while, Ralph threw in the towel: "Mollie just didn't take any crap from me. She stood up to me when I tried to push her around. She gave it right back. I didn't mess with Mollie anymore."

With that same characteristic zest, Mollie went to bat for the ESA, putting her whole heart and soul into it, not to mention her political future. Yet, although she was a passionate defender of the ESA, Mollie was not an ideologue, and she was not stupid. She knew that a stubborn adherence to the status quo was not going to work. The Act's substantive standards had to be preserved, of course, but there also had to be a credible set of "reforms" to blunt the thrust of the critics' arguments that the Act was inflexible, destructive of private property, and a drag on the economy. None of this was true, of course, but that really wasn't the point. In politics, illusion is reality, spin is fact, and polls are gospel. So, Mollie hit the road with her own campaign to educate the public and the press

about the Act's many successes (recovery of the bald eagle, peregrine falcon, American alligator, brown pelican, etc.), and to debunk all the myths and distortions about how awful the Act was. At the same time, recognizing the grave danger the Act was in, she helped design a tactical retreat in the best tradition of Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce, which Interior Secretary Babbitt announced as a ten point plan to fix the process without damaging the substance. Included in the plan were some hard pills to swallow—"safe harbors" and "no surprises" incentives for developers, look-the-other-way enforcement, more hoops for listings to jump through. Mollie may not have liked having to do this, but she was playing a weak hand and had to make the best of it. And when some in the environmental community turned on her, she took it in stride. The strategy did seem to work, breaking the momentum of the "Contract" forces, and giving the environmental community time to get its own act together and start mobilizing the strong public support that has always existed for endangered species protection.

During this critical period, Mollie was a one person truth squad, crisscrossing the country, exploding myths right and left, exposing lies, and speaking eloquently of the Act as our "early warning system," our "weather vane," and, my favorite, "Mother Nature's 911." She went to California, hotbed of anti-ESA sentiment, and was met with headlines screaming that federal rules protecting the habitat of some "endangered rat" (the Stephen's kangaroo rat) prevented homeowners from building dikes to protect their houses from the wildfires that swept through Los Angeles' exurbia in the summer of 1993. Mollie calmly pointed out that an independent study by the General Accounting Office concluded that dikes wouldn't have made any difference, the fires had jumped twelve-lane freeways and massive concrete canals, and that shifting winds and bad planning had more to do with the destruction than kangaroo rats.

She went to Texas, a place not known for its hospitality to government officials, especially *green* ones, to answer charges that the Fish and Wildlife Service had a secret plan to declare 20 million acres in 33 counties "critical habitat" for "some songbird." No truth to that rumor, said Mollie. In fact, FWS was cooperating with city and county officials outside Austin to develop an "HCP" (habitat conservation plan) for the golden-cheeked warbler (the songbird in question) that would provide for conservation of about 60,000 acres—not 20 million—for the benefit of not one but eight threatened or endangered species. Might want to take a look at why so many species were headed for extinction in that particular county, Mollie suggested. Might have something to do with urban sprawl, gobbling up habitat, exceeding the carrying capacity of the land, that sort of thing. Just a thought.

In Virginia, the story was that an "endangered bird's nest" had stopped a highway. Turned out it was a squirrel's nest, the highway wasn't stopped, and the ESA didn't have anything to do with it.

Everywhere Mollie went she was confronted with stories of the ESA stopping development, taking people's land and livelihood, killing jobs, bringing the economy to its knees. Well, let's look at the record, Mollie suggested. Out of 97,000 activities reviewed under the ESA between 1987 and 1992, 54 resulted in projects being withdrawn or abandoned. In case you don't have a calculator handy, that works out to .005—five one thousandths of one percent. How could any rational person, given this statistic, believe that the ESA was having any measurable impact on economic activity? Answer: no *rational* person could.

OK, but what about the jobs—all those loggers, farmers, miners, ranchers, real estate developers? Well, let's take another look at the facts. Fact: log exports and mill modernization have eliminated more jobs in the forestry industry than all 300 endangered species combine, spotted owl included. Fact: "boom and bust" economies associated with extractive industries in oil, mineral, and forest products—the same industries that have the biggest impact on endangered species more people off than the ESA.

As for confiscating property, the fact is that no court has ever found that the ESA has taken anybody's land. And if the concern is people's pocketbooks, more good would come of cracking down on junk bond scams and S&L frauds, or eliminating corporate welfare payments (e.g., the sugar subsidies that have ruined the Everglades) than picking on the ESA.

But the political process was not all that interested in truth. Paraphrasing Mark Twain: A lie will be around the globe twice before the truth gets out of bed. Like the one told by Richard Pombo, Chair of the Environment Subcommittee of the House Resource Committee, Don Young protégé, and a virulent opponent of the ESA. According to Mr. Pombo's sob story, told to the Senate Environment Committee, his ranch—the ranch that had been in the family "since the Gold Rush"—had just been declared critical habitat for the endangered San Joaquin kit fox rendering it "worthless." Great story; real tearjerker. Only one problem: it wasn't true. Mr. Pombo's ranch had not been declared critical habitat for the kit fox or anything else. When confronted by the media with this fact, Mr, Pombo said, well, maybe it was one of his neighbor's. Wrong again. In fact, no critical habitat had been designated for the kit fox. No matter, said the Congressman, the ESA still needed to be "fixed." Others might speculate on who needed fixing, but not Mollie. She stayed focused on the objective: get the facts out and let the process take care of the rest.

I always admired how Mollie could engage these mud slingers and never get any on her. She was tough but never mean; determined but never rigid; principled but never self-righteous. Maybe it was her Outward Bound training that gave her such stamina, patience and boundless optimism. Talk about optimistic, she even paid a call on Newt Gingrich to enlist his support for the ESA. And guess what? Eventually he obliged, showing up unannounced at one of Mr. Pombo's "kangaroo-court" hearings, talking about the importance of "lichens and fungi" to the functioning of life on earth (where do you suppose he got that idea?) and warning his Republican colleague not to report out a bill gutting the ESA.

More than anything, however, it was Mollie's eloquence in defense of the defenseless that I will most remember. With simple logic, an appeal to common sense, and unquestioned honesty—solid Vermont values—she made the case for stewardship of our natural heritage, for "saving all the pieces" as Aldo Leopold urged many years before. No matter how trivial another life form might appear to *homo sapiens*, our fates are intertwined. "When we see the snails and the mussels and the lichen in trouble, it is a signal that the ecosystems upon which we, too, depend are unraveling," Mollie said. "I believe there is only one conflict and that is between the short term and the long term thinking. In the long term, the economy and the environment are the same thing. If it's unenvironmental, it's uneconomical. That is a rule of nature."

Mollie was right. The proof is all around us. Take pesticides for example. Twenty years ago, Rachel Carson showed us that DDT was not just a pest killer, it was an eagle killer, an osprey killer, a peregrine falcon killer, an indiscriminate killer. Then we found strange compounds in our water supplies—things with names like dioxin, poly-aromatic hydrocarbons, organo-chlorines—the toxic offspring of those same pesticides and herbicides. Right up to today, two decades after *Silent Spring*, pesticides are still killing songbirds, at an estimated rate of sixty million a year, and still contaminating groundwater, the primary source of drinking water in many parts of the country.

Or take forestry practices. After clear-cutting its way from New England to the Pacific Northwest the timber industry was poised to "liquidate" the last of the great, publicly owned Douglas fir forests in Oregon and Washington. The only thing that stood in its way was *strix occidentalis*, the northern spotted owl, and the ESA. Of course, it wasn't just the owl; the owl is simply an indicator for a complex web of life that comprises the old growth ecosystem, a system that provides many things useful to humans, such as taxol, the cancer-fighting chemical found in the bark of the Pacific yew, and commercially valuable fish like salmon that spawn in old growth watersheds, not to mention all the potentially useful

things that are disappearing before we even have the chance to discover them, or the things that the market can't quite figure out how to price--spiritual stuff like the feeling you get hiking through a cathedral grove of two hundred trees draped in emerald moss, sunlight spilling through small openings in the sylvan canopy, and realizing you are standing in a forest that was there before the Roman Empire existed. Mollie understood this sort of thing and could articulate it for those who didn't know or think they cared about it. She could also talk jobs, as in the jobs that depended on the salmon runs that were declining, precipitously, across the Northwest as the spawning streams filled with the silt and debris oozing off scabrous clearcuts. Or the jobs of the loggers and mill workers that were headed for extinction, just like the owl, as soon as the last old tree fell, the last lumber truck rumbled through town, and the timber companies packed up and left for the next harvest—in Georgia, or Maine, or Malaysia, wherever there were trees to cut. Some would stay, of course, to plant tree farms of Douglas fir saplings in neat tidy rows, to be harvested in sixty year rotations, or less, depending on market conditions. Biological deserts compared to the rich ecosystem they replaced.

Meanwhile, the residents of Oregon and Washington get to watch in horror as the denuded mountainsides melt into an ugly chocolate mousse of murderous landslides.

Mollie sincerely believed it did not have to be this way. After all, we're the ones with the big brains, right? Asked what kind of legacy she wished to leave, Mollie once said, "I would like to have stopped the ridicule about the conservation of snails, lichens, and fungi, and instead move the debate to which ecosystems are the most recoverable and how we can save them, making room for them and for ourselves."

Mollie left us that and more. She gave us Hope, just like the name she gave to the rehabilitated eagle she released to commemorate upgrading the status of the bald eagle from endangered to threatened, not out of danger but out of the emergency room, at least. She believed in what she was doing and she lived a life that reflected the values she espoused. She also believed in the basic goodness, if sometimes waywardness, of people. Maybe she was right. It was Don Young, after all, her tormentor, who introduced the bill naming eight million acres of spectacular alpine wilderness on the summit of the Brooks Range in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, in her honor. As fitting a tribute as this is, one that I think would please Mollie even more would be the reauthorization of a stronger and better ESA in the 105th Congress. You can't love Mollie and hate the ESA.

One day I hope to take my daughter Elizabeth on a trip to Yellowstone. We'll strap on the packs and head up the trail, as far into the back country as possible. We'll find a nice spot to camp, close to a mountain brook so we can hear the sound of rushing water and maybe catch a cutthroat for breakfast. We'll have a little trail stew, tell a few stories, and let the darkness and the quiet of the night envelop us. And maybe, if we're lucky, we'll hear the haunting voices of *canis lupus*, the gray wolf, engaged in nightly conversation with Mother earth. Then we'll smile and remember that it was Mollie who restored the wolf to its rightful place in Yellowstone, put the wild back into wilderness, and a little bit of magic back into our hearts.

Thanks, Mollie.