

## The Anthropocene and the Magic of our Ecostories

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On 25<sup>th</sup> January 2017, I landed at the small and cosy airport in Wilmington, North Carolina to carry out my postdoc research supported by the UNCW-IIUI Academic partnership program funded by the Department of State, US Embassy. Wilmington is a port city in North Carolina and is known for its one-mile long Riverfront at the Cape Fear River which is regarded as the most beautiful riverfront in America. The city has gardens, Reserves, Natural habitats and four beaches including Fort Fisher, Wrightsville Beach, Carolina Beach, and Kure Beach.

I could not think that my very first morning walk in Wilmington on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016 to get familiar with the place and the neighbourhood would be the beginning of life-transforming experience with nature. The clear pollution free blue sky, clusters of tall trees all around the house, campus, and the area, fresh and soft breeze, and a pleasant symphony of the birds' twittering worked their magic, and I found all overwhelmingly beautiful. I loved the place. It was pleasant to observe how skillfully nature is infused in the city planning; Wilmington appeared to me as an ecologically friendly city. The landscape of Wilmington made me fall in love with nature for its own sake; trees, flowers, birds and sunshine all appear in an unusual light with uncommon beauty. Pleasant walks on the trails, sittings near water ponds and under tall shady trees in open green fields, walks on the paths adorned with irises, tulips, azalea and roses generated pure pleasure and had a magical soothing effect on my nerves and the heart. The time spent in nature was

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the time of deep reflection on the human-nature relationship; the moments of deep reflection worked to review the privileged positioning of humans in the vast web of the ecosystem thriving with the multiple forms of life. The fault which lies in the anthropogenic lifestyle and thinking of human beings which gives a privileged position to them by which they consider it their legitimate right to control and use nature became apparent. It was obvious to learn that how our misinterpreted notions about the ontological exceptionality of humans deny us the wisdom, whereby we appreciate the magic of interconnectedness and invisible artistry which is in the diversity of biosphere and have an overwhelming experience of being a meaningful part of the grand web of the ecosystem. The journey from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism is, though tough but it offers exceptional contentment and joy; it liberates us from constant and insatiable desires which lead us to pursue our happiness in material things and luxuries. The harmony, interconnectedness, and interdependence, once we can observe the biodiversity of the ecosystems, it painfully makes us more critical of the politics of identity and labels which have divided humanity. Nothing, then, appears more absurd than the human greed to overuse nature and disturb its harmony and deplete its resources in the name of modernisation and advancement. We learn to be mindful of our overconsumption and avoid all those acts which lead towards “ecocide” in the name of the progress and development. The understanding of the grand web of ecosystems which interconnect millions and trillions of organisms is the inspirational lifestyle model for the modern humans engaged in an endless pursuit of acquiring material resources.

Wilmington, like other modern cities in the world, has an impact of growing industrialisation and consumption which we can observe in the form of city sprawl, deforestation and the overuse of cars and vehicles and resultant

construction of highways to meet the needs of growing traffic. However, the distinction of the city is that the planners of the city have their environmental conservation policies and have taken care of ecosystem and habitats. Therefore, developmental activities do not alter the natural state of the earth and damage the ecosystem. The efforts of the city planner to conserve the elements of the natural world is exhibited in the form of planting natural gardens on undeveloped land, reserves, preserving natural habitats like forests and water ponds, massive tree plantations and preserving green open spaces across the landscape of the city. Airlie Garden, Halliburton park, Greenfield lake park, The Abbey Nature Preserve, Old Forest, and Wildflower Preserve at UNCW are a few such spaces among many in the city. And similarly, to generate a healthy lifestyle intimately connected with nature, the planners have also designed and provided a variety of places for bicycling, walking and jogging, camping, swimming, fishing, bird and animal watching, kayaking and boating, and open fields for sports and events such as flower festivals and market fairs. The festivals and other such activities celebrated to pay homage to nature manifest the living and vibrant interrelationship between human cultural life and nature in Wilmington. The environmentally conscious planning of the city and people's environmental friendly lifestyle and social activities appeared to me as the most inspiring feature of the city.

The most exciting time of the year in this port city is Spring, which starts in mid-February and lasts until April. The season adorns the with beautiful Azalea, Camellias, dogwood, daffodils, tulips and roses and flowering trees such as redbud, cherry, and magnolia and fills the city with the spirit of festivity. The highlight of the season is a famous festival called Azalea Festival which has been celebrated in the region since 1948. The Festival manifests the spirits of the

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American South by featuring dance, music, marches, and local arts and crafts exhibitions which are arranged in the Downtown Wilmington. The most popular activity in the Azalea festival arranged by the city administration as well by people who own big gardens celebrating the blooming of Azalea in Wilmington. Summer follows the Spring, and this coastal city becomes very humid due to frequent rains and rain storms. The change in the season leads Wilmington to pay homage to nature through other eco-friendly activities and festivals. Berry picking is the most favourite outdoor activity in Summer. Many farms such as Lewis Farms grow blueberries, strawberries, and blackberries under protected tunnels made on their big farms. In summer these farms are open for the public to "Pick your Own" berries. Young, old, children and families swarm the farms to eat and collect their berries. It was a great fun for me to eat and pick berries while walking between the tunnels where berry plants loaded with fruit seem welcoming us in the humid May.

The best of my memories of my six-month stay in Wilmington are the moments of peace, ecstasy and mute dialogue held with nature during my long walks in the early mornings and in the evening on the trails carved in woods. It was during these long walks that I experienced nature very closely and intimately; an exceptional bond silently and gradually was formed by hugging trees, touching their leaves and barks, listening to breeze passing through leaves, seeing and touching a flower from different angles, exploring shades of the same color, gazing at the spacious green fields and shadowy paths, listening to and trying to identify different sounds of the birds. I could feel invisible threads which connect us with the earth, plants, sky, and water and was thrilled with a joy I never experienced before. It all had a profound effect to make me learn that our active

response to nature is also our intellectual or rational understanding of the world of nature around us. When we genuinely derive pleasure from the beautiful forms, sounds, and colours we actually develop our understanding of what beauty is; beauty becomes purity, generosity, peace, condensation, patience, healing, and unconditional affection extending to all. Each season in nature brought its own beauty; thus beauty never dies in nature; nature and its cycles of change taught me the true meaning of resilience. My Wilmington experience thus turned out to be a life-transforming experience which enabled me to develop an alternate perception of the Earth, our planet. The new understanding dismantled my view regarding a privileged anthropogenic position of humans, and the beautiful forms which used to appear as mere abstractions to me became alive making me feel I breathe with them in the grand web of the ecosystem. This was the beginning of the realisation of the significance of educating ourselves about environmental ethics to foster an eco-friendly view of the planet and recognise the rights of non-human species. The very realisation that anthropogenic thinking as the leading cause of our mindless pursuit of material progress is actually responsible for the heinous ecological crisis the world is suffering from transforming our modes of thinking about nature and environment. We need to learn that it is our psychological, emotional and physical disconnect with nature that has resulted in human greed and perversion and is responsible for enormous ecological crises and environmental degradation. The Wilmington experience highlights the need to develop a personal affiliation with nature; the personal bonding has potential to develop an intuitive understanding of the ecosystems and understand the horrors of the Anthropocene. Today we live in the age of the Anthropocene when humans have become a noticeable geological force that has the power to move tectonic plate of the earth and transform the environment of the planet. Deforestation and

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chemically poisoned food, water, and air, water scarcity and resource depletion, layers of plastic rocks, pollution and toxicity, and the absence of biodiversity all are manifestations of the Anthropocene.

There is a considerable volume of research available which highlights environmental degradation and its hazardous impact on ecosystems and the scholarship in the related fields builds our understanding of the crisis and help us learn the ways to protect the environment. Along with these let us share the stories of our personal experiences with nature; our stories being emerged out of our deep recesses of the heart have potential to connect us deeply with nature whereby we can develop a critical understanding of ecological problems and become willing to mitigate these problems. These stories speak our heart and thus are powerful efforts to counter the horrors of the Anthropocene which warns us that humans being oblivious to their negative role in the planet are pushing the planet to its destruction. Humans with their faulty notions of the economic and technological development have made nature an endangered species and have become dangerous for the non-humans as well for fellows humans. Our personal stories telling our intimate relationship with nature can make a huge difference in recognising the agency of the non-human as crucial for the environmental sustainability and making a harmonious living possible in the ecosystem. Our ecostories as they explore the human-nature intimate relationship are inspirational and can build up alternative perception necessary to re-examine “inherited notion of the human, the cultural, and the ‘identity’.” I believe my ecostory contributes in ongoing efforts to develop environmental consciousness and foster critical ecological thinking.