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Review: Coming Home to the Pleistocene

By Paul Shepard

Reviewed by [Dale A. Stirling](#)
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Shepard, Paul. *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*. Washington D.C.:
Island Press, 1998. 240 pp. Tables. Index. Cloth: \$24.95. ISBN: 1-
55963-589-4

In one slim volume, noted naturalist author Paul Shepard crosses the terrain of anthropology, history, naturalism, and genetics in one broad stroke. In the process he condemns those who chronicle or attempt to explain past human events, and, at the same time, does his best to explain why we should or could return to our Pleistocene roots. His tactic of condemnation is at times infuriating and confounding. And yet his book is quite fascinating and this reviewer will be reading it again, perhaps several times over the next few years. Shepard, who died in 1996, was the author of several books that attempted to explain man's connection to nature, but with this work he has purported to coalesce all his experience and opinion into one book. However, Shepard did not complete the manuscript prior to his death. Therefore his wife Florence edited the book and took on the task of "filling in the blanks." As she explains in the preface "In a couple of instances, I added an Editor's note from material that I thought he might have found pertinent (p. ix-x)." I think she suffers familiarity well, but may makes leaps of faith and assumption that cannot be fully relied upon.

Shepard introduces the book with the statement that "This book is about our self-consciousness as individuals and our world-view as a species based on the biological legacy and cultural influences we inherited from our ancestors, the Pleistocene hunter/gatherers (also called foragers) (p. 1)." Over the next nine chapters, Shepard attempts to explain how the Pleistocene is relevant to our present. In Chapter 1, "The Relevance of the Past," he does little to explain the relevance; rather, he uses it as soapbox to slam history. It is a curious exercise that achieves little. A typical example is his statement that "history does not resolve our confusion but further misleads us with its mix of dreams and visions, infantile mnemonics, Golden Ages, Christian paradises, escapism, ethnographic misinformation, and fundamentalist attempts to make of it a mythology (p. 15)." But then he makes more clear why he disavows history by concluding, "the prehistoric unconscious forms a better basis

for the creation of a new history (p. 17)."

For the next several chapters Shepard discusses the characteristics of our Pleistocene past, both mentally and physically, and argues that our genes contain a connection to our past that can lead us into a better tomorrow. He also writes at length about characteristics of our subsistence past, focusing on our hunter/gatherer or forager period and the transition to what he terms the "cowboy alternative." Unfortunately, Shepard does not make a clear case for a genetic connection to our wilderness past nor does he convince this reader that we can learn from our Pleistocene past. He says, "because we have never left our genome and its authority, the strategic nature of the past is born with us (p. 154)"; however, he ignores the fact that we are a product of our contemporary environment, not just our genetic history. Conventional wisdom and a popular saying tell us that you can never go back. Shepard does not agree.

Despite my issues with Shepard's thought process and arguments; his extended essay is thought provoking and I will be deep in its pages once again. Indeed, this book is appropriate fodder for anyone interested in the convergence of anthropology, contemporary culture change, and genetics.

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