Consuming Nature
Bill McKibben

1 To be under siege from a cloud of blackflies is to feel your sanity threatened. In and out of your ears they crawl, biting as they go; in and out of your nose, your mouth, the corners of your eyes. If you've covered up everything but your hands, they will start there and crawl to your wrists, leaving welts wherever they feed. I went out to the garden one spring evening without my shirt tucked in tight enough, and when I came in five minutes later my wife described to me the perfect row of bites, twenty or thirty of them, that ran along the narrow gap of skin that had winked open when I stooped to weed.

2 Blackflies hover in a cloud about your face and move with you for miles, so great is their need for your warmth and company and blood. Every writer of the mountainous North has tried to describe their voraciousness—"winged assassins," "lynch mobs," "jaws on wings." Here in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York they constitute their own season, one that lasts as long as spring or high summer or fall color (though not as long as winter). For six or seven weeks, from before Memorial Day to after the Glorious Fourth, the paradise of a town where I live, an enormous expanse of mountain and river and stream and lake and pond, is a paradise flawed. Most of the land here is protected by the state constitution, proclaimed "forever wild," but the legislature has never managed to resolve away the blackflies.

3 It's not that no one's tried. As early as 1948, local towns seeking to extend the tourist season were spraying DDT from helicopters. Rachel Carson put an end to that by 1965 (and by the early 1990s the first eagles were finally returning to the Adirondacks to nest, their eggs' shells again thick enough to allow them to hatch). In subsequent years, some towns used malathion or methoxychlor, sprayed usually from the air but always in the face of opposition. Then, more recently, some scientists began experimenting with a more natural method of control, a naturally occurring bacteria called Bacillus thuringiensis israelensis, which had been used for many years for organic control of garden pests. The israelensis subspecies, from the deserts of the Middle East, is highly specific for mosquitoes and blackflies. And so there was soon a small Adirondack industry of private contractors who would bid for the right to treat streams each spring, killing off the blackfly larvae in ways that appealed to both environmentalists and tourist-seeking local businesses.

4 But our town had never gone in for BTI, as the treatment is known, in large part because it is a frugal place, with the lowest property taxes in the region. No one ever brought the question up, and so spring after spring we had blackfly season, hard on the heels of mud season. Then, suddenly, that changed. A petition circulated demanding that Johnsburg join the list of towns that treat their streams. The movement may have started one morning at a Rotary Club meeting in Smith's Restaurant, at which a local realtor got up to complain that she'd lost a sale when she could not even get a couple from car to house, the flies were so thick. Sandy Taylor heard her and agreed to help write a petition.
Sandy Taylor and her husband, Jim, moved here from the South and before that the Midwest, where Jim had worked for the Monsanto Company. They are exactly the sort of people who revitalize communities by moving into them. Before long Sandy was helping to organize our town's new library. The Taylors became mainstays of Rotary, of the church, of the theater group. They represent everything that is good about a certain American civic ideal, a spirit that is in many ways foreign to this backwoods spot. And it's not as if they are environmentally unaware or unconcerned; Sandy worked for many years as a guide at the biological research station run by Washington University in her hometown. “Our happiest memories as a family,” she told me once, “are the camping trips we used to take.”

But for her, as for most people, blackflies were not a desirable part of nature “I can't garden, and I can't walk in the woods without all this protective paraphernalia, which is uncomfortable and hot and irritating,” she told me. “My legs become a mass of bites that don't go away till August.” Soon several hundred people had signed the petition she helped draw up, and the town board was busy drafting a set of specifications so it could put the job out for bids. Local innkeepers predicted that the cost might well be covered by the taxes paid by vacationers who would otherwise stay away. It looked like a done deal, as if our town would soon join the twenty-one other Adirondack communities that treat their streams with BTI.

Against most expectations, however, opposition began to form. It was not particularly organized—there was no official group, no “Save Our Flies” contingent. Instead, questioning letters started appearing in the local newspaper. Some of the comments concerned cost. “This is going to cost us $40,000, my share will be $56, and I don't even know if it's going to work,” said one resident. Others questioned the effectiveness of the plans: Johnsburg covers a vast area, most of it deep wilderness, and since blackflies will migrate a good distance in search of the blood they need to lay eggs, all those streams would have to be treated, which some experts said was a dubious proposition.

But most of the opposition was unexpectedly philosophical. For one thing, the messages of thirty years of ecological thinking had begun to penetrate people's minds. The fact that there are millions of blackflies around Johnsburg in the spring, several residents pointed out, means that something must eat them for dinner. Fishermen testified that they had slit open trout bellies to find them crammed with blackflies; others worried about birds, or about bats, or simply about whether it was prudent to muck around with Such Vast Systems.

And there were the people who said, This is not such a big problem. Sure, a few days a year, when there's no wind, it gets bad, and so I wear my bug veil or I stay indoors.

And there was something more yet. A surprising number of my neighbors said—not always loudly, maybe with a shade of embarrassment—that somehow the blackflies were a part of life here, one of the things that make us whatever it is that we are.
I once did an odd experiment in which I found the largest cable television system on earth, which was at the time a hundred-channel operation in Virginia, and got people to tape for me everything that came across all the channels during the same twenty-four-hour period. I took my 2,400 hours of videotape home to the Adirondacks and spent a year watching it, trying to figure out what the world would look like were that one's main window on it. And what I found, amid the many lessons that spewed forth from the six home shopping channels, the four music video channels, the three sports channels, was this one overriding message: You are the most important thing on earth. You are the center of creation, the heaviest object in the known universe; all things orbit your desires.

This is, of course, the catechism of the consumer society—the elevation of each one of us above all else. Sometimes it is described as “human nature,” usually by people who would argue that you can't do anything at all about it. But of course in other times and other places, people have managed to put other things at the center of their lives—their tribe or community, their God, nature, or some amalgamation of these. Sometimes that's been all to the good: visit an Amish community. Sometimes it's meant pogroms. All I'm saying is that there have been other choices on offer.

Whether that still is true, however, I'm not sure. We have grown up in a culture so devoted to consumption that we define ourselves through certain patterns of consuming and I doubt very much we can truly shake our conditioning. How else would we behave? Save for the relative few of us who ever experience actual hunger or actual involuntary exposure to the elements, that sense of reality is as hard to summon as a sense of what it felt like to be chased by saber-toothed tigers. Poor people are just as interested in brand names as anyone else, just as devoted to the various cults (convenience, comfort, identity) of this central religion as anyone else.

And so it is no real stretch to say that the drive to eliminate blackflies from the small rural town where I live is simply one more manifestation of our deep consumer urge. We want to consume bite-free air; we want to consume our cedar decks and our pools and our gardens free of any complication or annoyance. We want to consume them when we want (not just on windy days) and how we want (bare-chested, with no bug veil). Jim Taylor spent the latter part of his career at Monsanto managing the AstroTurf division—managing the metaphor, fair or not, for conversion of the natural into the convenient.

But what about those of us who oppose the blackfly treatment, we exemplars of biological virtue, eager to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of that great order Diptera and its thirst for our blood? How do we explain our escape from the great consumer faith into which we were baptized?
Mainly, I think, we do so by saying that we are just consumers, too. Why do I not want blackfly larvae killed in Mill Creek where it runs past my house? Partly because I don't want the biology of the stream tampered with but at least as much because I live not in Generic Suburban America, where everything is supposed to be convenient, but in the Rugged Frontier Adirondacks, where everything is supposed to be a challenge. At some level, I fear that I like blackfly season for the same reason I like winter and bad roads: because it heightens the adventure of living here. I consume inconvenience, turning it into a pleasurable commodity; it becomes the fuel for my own sense of superiority. I don't feel special because I own a particular brand of clothing or drive a particular make of car. I feel special because I have a crappy car, because I wear old clothes all the time, because it's a twenty-mile round-trip to get a quart of milk. I like it when people call up from the city to talk and the power has just failed, or a blizzard has just struck, or the temperature has gone to thirty below. I feel larger because of all that, I think; it pumps me up the way a Nike shoe, a Rolex watch, a Ford Explorer is supposed to pump us up. Blackfly season is a test, something to endure; I come out of it feeling tougher, stronger—which means, I think, that I'm a superconsumer, too. Blackfly season is about me.

And in this, I imagine, I am not alone. The shift toward voluntary simplicity now under way in some small corners of American culture is simply a shift toward a new self-image. Instead of defining ourselves by what we buy, we define ourselves by what we throw away.

There is clearly a sense in which this slightly submerged consumerism is more twisted than its straightforward counterpart. Elimination is a logical human response to blackflies, BTI a giant and efficient version of the timeless slapping hand. Wanting to consume fly-free air is, at some level, extremely logical. Finding a way to consume fly-filled air is more than a little nuts.

So is it all just a toss-up? If ours is an age of endless irony, when nonconsumption is just another form of image building, does it make any difference how we live? Can you say that one path is better than the other? Can you say we shouldn't kill all the dreaded blackflies?

You can, I think, though you have to say it carefully, aware that your own sense of superiority is more than a little absurd.

The first argument is clear: even if the main reasons why you defend blackflies or recycle your dental floss have to do with you, they nonetheless benefit the rest of creation. Whereas normal consumption is almost by definition costly to the earth, this more rarefied form is cheap and undamaging. This is a great practical virtue, since the results of normal, everyday consumer life now threaten to wreck everything around us. I've spent much of the past ten years writing about global warming, which is nothing more than the sum total of our lavish devotion to convenience, comfort, and power. It is human desire translated into planetary physics, and unless we can get those desires under some kind of control, the physics will turn impossible. By this analysis, though it may be bizarre to
consume by not consuming, doing so is like supplanting heroin with methadone; one's cravings are stilled with minimum damage to the underlying system.

And yet there is something more to it than that. By its very nature, this kind of somewhat silly nonconsuming puts us in harm's way—raises the possibility that we will be exposed to forces that might actually change us, might begin to erode some of the conditioning we've carried since near birth. An example: When I lived in New York City, I helped start a small homeless shelter at my church and spent many nights there. This was classic nonconsumer behavior, robbing me of many hours I might have spent in restaurants, bars, or movie theaters. But of course I did not do it because I was a good Christian; I did it because I wanted the sense of being a slightly sainted fellow. Over time, however, the mere fact of being there began to change me in certain small ways. I learned that it made me feel peaceful to do the small daily tasks of that place—changing the sheets, cooking the soup, delousing the pillowcases. It was one of the paths to learning not to resent housework, one way to cease the innate consumer desire for a maid (or a mother). In fact, I sensed, counterintuitively, that this work made me happy. Having been exposed to some deeper (if transient) joy, I was marginally less of a sucker for the various ersatz appeals of popular culture.

Sometimes now I help with the campaign to return wolves to the Adirondacks. They were wiped out here in the last years of the nineteenth century by people who thought of them in the way realtors now think of blackflies—as an annoyance standing in the way of progress. I try not to pretend that my main interest is with the wolves themselves or even with the health of the forest, which badly needs a top predator. I know that what I want is to hear a wolf howling in the woods because it will make this place, and my life here, feel yet more romantic. I will consume that wolf howl, just as my predecessors consumed the quiet of their suddenly wolfless nights. But once the wolf is there, its howl will also carry certain other, less obvious messages; and there will be the remote chance of an encounter with this grand representative of creation, an encounter that might go beyond mere consumption. I saw a grizzly bear one recent summer in Alaska, and the sheer reality of that encounter shook some small part of me out of the consumer enchantment into which I was born.

Blackflies accomplish this, too, in a subtler way. They remind me day after day in their season that I'm really not the center of the world, that I'm partly food, implicated in the crawl and creep of things. They are a humbling force, and even if for a time I can involve them in my self-aggrandizing myths, they still exert a slow and persuasive pressure of their own. Over the course of a decade, living in a place dominated by high mountains, wild winters, summer storms, trackless forest, and hungry insects has in fact warped me in certain ways. I am not the same person who came here. I am still a consumer; the consumer world was the world I emerged into, and its assumptions still dominate my psyche—but maybe a little less so each year. And perhaps they dominate my daughter just a little less than that. There are times when I can feel the spell breaking in my mind—the spell of the advertiser on the tube. There are times when I can almost feel myself simply being.
At least for this year, Johnsburg decided not to use BTI. Instead, a questionnaire is being sent out with the tax bills. If the town were to treat the streams, it asks, would you be willing to give the workers access to your land? I think quite a few people, probably enough to make the plan unfeasible, will say no. Like me, they'll probably do it without quite knowing why. But it's one small sign for me that the enchantment is wearing off, that the incantation sung over our cradles by the television set may be less permanent than some think. A sign that spring may be coming—and with it the biting flies.