

Rewilding and surviving

By MIKE KLEPPER

Peter Bauer has been standing in his front yard, wringing out what looks like a long, fleshy towel. He throws it into a five-gallon bucket, adds a pinkish-brown solution that smells like cat food from a pot and churns the mixture with his fists. He stands up to greet a visitor.

"I'd shake your hand," Bauer says, "but mine are covered in brains."

Bauer is tanning a deer hide. He's already scraped the flesh and fur from it and is applying a warm mixture of pig brains in order to tan it. The process has been used by numerous indigenous cultures going back thousands of years.

A slight young guy wearing a camouflaged bandana and aviator shades and a Southeast resident, he has been cultivating an alternate persona and growing a primitive skills community in Portland. This person is named Urban Scout.

"I can trace my perception of the world back to my early childhood," Bauer says, "having empathy for things other than humans, towards the land, trees, animals. That sort of conflicted with how we're supposed to behave in our modern world, where we're just supposed to destroy everything. From my childhood, I was always thinking 'What the hell is wrong with people?'"

Bauer, a northeast Portland native, dropped out of high school in 1998 at the age of 16, to learn hunting and gathering skills. Bauer says he snapped one night while doing a report for class.

"I realized a high school diploma wasn't going to help me survive the collapse of industrial civilization," Bauer says. "I didn't even know what edible plants were in my bioregion. I didn't know anything about the natural world whatsoever and I was an Eagle Scout at the time."

Running away from home to attend a class by renowned wilderness skills teacher Tom Brown's Tracker School in New Jersey, he then traveled the circuit of wilderness and primitivist skills camps and meet-ups, becoming part of a tracker's club at Oxbow Park.

Bauer eventually began teaching others. "Teaching is one of my favorite things to do," he says.

Walking around his neighborhood, he points out useful plants, such as Australian flax, an ornamental grass useful for basketry. A friend and fellow primitivist grabs a few leaves from a Japanese maple and stuffs them in his mouth; apparently they're delicious at this time of year. Bauer points to a copse of thick bamboo and speaks about it admiringly. It's lightweight and strong and useful for construction.

The Urban Scout persona came about while Bauer was making a film with a friend in 2004. "It was almost like a pilot for a TV show and in order to create a buzz for the film, I started to go around town as the character. I was wearing a loincloth that was made from a piece of wool I got from The Bins and mud that was supposed to be camouflage."

Bauer promoted the film on



Peter Bauer aka Urban Scout

social media and people started friending him, then approaching him around town, calling him Urban Scout. "It sort of became an alter-ego," Bauer says. "I started thinking 'This is actually how I want to live.'"

Bauer rarely wears a loincloth around town these days, but he does sport a tattoo of a raccoon with arrows crossed behind it, which has become his insignia. He has written a book on his philosophy, which he calls "rewilding" and holds regular classes teaching the skills of a contemporary hunter-gatherer, which include making stone tools, bow-making, tanning hides, weaving baskets from English ivy and foraging in an urban environment.

"Rewilding," Bauer says, "is the idea that modern agricultural civilization is unsustainable and causes 99 percent of our social injustices. The emphasis is on returning to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. It's okay if agriculture is a part of your subsistence strategy, but it can't be the whole thing. That's what destroys the soil and leads to environmental collapse and social collapse at the same time."

Bauer says other civilizations, such as the Maya and the Inca, after achieving civilization, collapsed and returned to hunter-gatherer ways. He sees our civilization, which uses finite resources, such as fossil fuels, to produce and ship goods and transport them, as well as generate energy, in the beginning stages of just such a collapse. Rewilding, according to Bauer, is a survival strategy that gets back to a culture that human beings lived within for the majority of their existence: as hunter-gatherers.

Bauer passes a Labrador and the dog goes crazy on its leash; it obviously smells the deer hide on Bauer's pants. At one point, he dips into a store to buy ground beef and some chocolate. When he emerges, he addresses the contradictions apparent in his philosophy.

He says living an entirely hunter-gatherer lifestyle is difficult to nearly impossible in many places, as large, undisturbed tracts of land where ancient people roamed are now demarcated as nature preserves, or agricultural land, or private property and highly regulated.

Before civilization, people didn't eat the cereal grains we do today and neither does he, but he's unable to scavenge and forage enough in an urban environment to meet his nutritional needs. It's illegal to hunt in the city and, while he has eaten road-

kill, there isn't enough and it could be riddled with infectious disease, such as ringworm.

"I get a lot of my food and sustenance from civilization," Bauer says. "Obviously, I'm still a member here. On a personal level, as much as I can critique civilization, I can't change my predicament within it overnight."

Bauer continues "It's not that we don't know how to live sustainably. It's that there is a group of people with guns not letting it happen. I have friends who live in the woods and hunt and gather most of their own food, but they're not creating a lot of change. They're not getting ideas out there. For me it's not about running away."

Urban Scout holds a rewilding skillshare the last Saturday of every month at various parks within Portland. More information can be found at his website, rewildportland.com.

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