Rewilding and surviving

By Mick Kleiner

Peter Bauer has been standing in his fruit yard, wringing out what looks like a long, flabby towel. He throws it into a five-gallon bucket, adds a pinkish-brown solution that smells like cat food from a pot and1

mixes with his first. He stands up to greet a visitor.

"I'll 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 camouflage bandana and aviator shades and a Southeastern 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 conflict 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 1999 at the age of 16, to learn hunting and gardening skills. Bauer says he snapped one night while doing a report for class.

"I realized I had 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 backyard. I didn't know anything about the natural world whatever 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 primitive skills camps and meet-ups, becoming part of a tracker's club at Oswego 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 flora, an ornamental grass useful for butterfly gardening. A friend and fellow primitive grabs a few leaves from a Japanese maple and stuffs them in his mouth, apparently they're decedent at this time of year. Bauer points to a copse of thin 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 films, 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 Farm and mud that was supposed to be camouflage."

Bauer promoted the film on social media and people started transfusing 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 Incas, 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 lead; 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.

"I say 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 starve and forsage 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 saddled 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, much more than 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's 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."