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April 2007

*We found this magazine article in some weird tech-rag we found in Seattle. It was under creative commons licensing, so we think it's okay to republish. From what we can gather, the magazine isn't around anymore anyhow. Obviously, we do not support the views of this article. We don't know that anyone does. We found it as attractive as a car-wreck, however. Maybe it's satire. That would be nice. Yeah, it's probably satire.*

— strangers

## **Beating around the Blackbush**

“Humanity took a wrong turn with agriculture. Everything was pretty good up until then.” My host—a thirty-something white man with a close-cropped reddish-brown beard and rather un-striking features—informed me as we rode along a thin asphalt path, perched on our Segway motor-scooters. His brown tie flapped over his shoulder in the slight summer breeze, his button-down shirt was rolled up to his biceps. “Yup, we really dropped the ball on that one.”

Mike Redding, the speaker, is part of Blackbush Tribe, LLC. He and forty-eight others live nomadically on a privately owned, 50,000-acre nature reserve in New England, living the life of modern hunter/gatherers. The median income of his “tribe” is \$250,000.

Curiously blending the latest in technology, digital-age spirituality, and a back-to-the-land ethic, the men and women (mostly men) of Blackbush Tribe are the ultimate telecommuters. “We’re as much a product of Web 2.0 as we are of our primitive roots,” Mike explained, “we’re really finding a new symbiosis, a new way of being.” A wide grin of perfect teeth crept across his face, “We’re the best of both worlds.”

Mike, about to follow up on this thought, was interrupted by a beeping from the SmartPhone on his belt. He un-holstered and

studied the device for a moment before looking up at me, the grin still plastered to his face. “Looks like a bird fell into one of our traps. C’mon, let’s go find it and eat it!”

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I first heard of the Tribe’s ongoing two-year experiment last winter, by word of mouth. Their existence was a rumor in the web-development circles that my brother partook in, and it was a rumor he passed on with glee. After slogging through archive.org, I eventually uncovered blog posts from the start of the project, before all the details were taken offline.

From there, a few emails led me to Mike Redding, Project Manager of Interspecies Carnivorous Relations for Blackbush. Soon I was on a plane to Providence, Rhode Island, flying coach from my own pocket since my usual paper declined to finance the trip.

I had no idea what to expect, and I admit I was a bit disappointed when I saw my name written on a greeting sign at the airport—the man who held it was clean, sharply dressed, and unequivocally plain. We took a shuttle to his car, an electric van, and drove out toward their land. But as soon as we pulled onto the freeway, Mike offered me strips of elk jerky from a Ziploc bag, and I knew my curiosity would not be disappointed.

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From the GPS set into the handlebars of his electric scooter, Mike led us down winding dirt paths through the second-growth forest and onto a pristine field. The grass might never have seen a mower and the summer sky was clear and blue. Somewhere in the distance was a trace of bird-song, and the day felt peaceful. “We’ll have to walk,” Mike apologized as he dismounted and switched on the anti-theft device on his Segway, “but it’s only about fifty meters.”

We traipsed through the field in our work-boots and blue jeans and soon I saw a few dozen wooden birdhouses set onto aluminum

after one child. Maybe, with an IQ test, you could be trusted to bear two. And I don't want to hear about how it's cruel to the poor. If there were less people, there wouldn't be any poor. We could all live this way. It's a simple question of resource allotment."

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Never have I met a stranger group of people. As I write this, I still feel the warmth of the gazelle soup, spiced with wild herbs. I still remember the precarious feeling of perching on the back of a Segway before I learned to trust its dynamic instability. And at night, sometimes, I still dream of the hunt. Of bow and spear, the hum of electric motor, the death cries of a wounded animal, of blood.

poles ahead of us. "Not all of them are trapped, of course," Mike explained as he un-velcroed a synthetic one-shoulder backpack and unzipped the main compartment, "or the birds would never nest here. And we don't leave these bird-gathering solutions armed when we leave for the year. That would be cruel." There was no trace of irony in his voice.

Approaching the base of one of the supports, which extended some three feet above our heads, Mike depressed a button and the pole slid in on itself until the birdhouse was at chest level. With a practiced hand, he opened a door set into the base of the birdhouse and pulled out a sparrow. "*Passeridae Domesticus*," Mike announced happily, "or some such. Lunch, anyways, right?" Mike looked at me, gave me the knowing laugh I recognized painfully from my miserable days working in my paper's office, and broke the bird's neck. It went into his pack and we returned to our Segways.

I stood on mine too quickly, it seemed, because a shrill car alarm burst out and shattered the calm of the field. Mike grinned and pressed a button on his keychain, and the alarm gave a noise of acknowledgement before going silent. Mike laughed his grating laugh and mounted his scooter himself. Soon we were whizzing back through the forest to the encampment.

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"Thousands of years ago, all humans used to live like this," Mike told me that night as we sat in his spacious one-room log-cabin summer house, "and we better understood our connection to nature. We, humanity, we're *hunters*, I tell you. We're not tillers of the land. What's more, we're best of breed in the animal kingdom, thanks to this," Mike held up one hand and pointed to its thumb with a forefinger. "The opposable thumb. It all starts there."

"And what about all of this?" I asked, "The Blackbush Tribe. How did *it* start?"

Mike stood and opened one of the storm-resistant windows set into the wall, letting the fresh night air in. When he retook his seat, he told a story for me and my eager tape recorder.

“I’ve always thought different. I’m an independent thinker, a natural entrepreneur. A go-getter type. Everyone here is like that. We all give 110%. But when you work hard, you play hard, you’ve got to understand.

“Me and some of the guys, we used to all live in Seattle together and work for some of the better dot-coms. This was back when we weren’t doing as well financially, after the bottom fell out of the industry and we were lucky to scrape together 80, 90 grand a year. We took a sort of rebellious, youthful pride in our high-risk, high-gain lifestyle, you know, and we formed a Segway gang.

“Every Friday night we’d get together, about twenty of us, and Segway from bar to bar, getting pretty hammered. After a few months we got our ducks in a row; we had jackets made—sportscoats with “Seattle Segway Gang, LLC.” across the back—and we had a short run of luck doing consulting work for hip companies who wanted to give their team-members a chance to blow off some steam. But once we had picked all the low-hanging fruit, our business model just didn’t carry-through, and it was back to drinking at the bars.

“Anyway, the industry picked up and we rode that wave, surfing our way to the big bucks. Suddenly we were no longer struggling to pay off our second cars, and even the rising gas prices didn’t scare us. It was around this time that [Blackbush Tribe Executive Manager] Scott picked up a book called *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn. And if that book didn’t change our lives—”

I poured myself another glass of homemade wine as Mike continued his story.

“We knew that despite our money, we weren’t happy. When I was younger, of course, I thought that it was simply because I wasn’t making *enough* money. But then I realized that this whole

“Now, before we go hunting, you’re going to have to sign this non-disclosure agreement.”

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Thanks to the fine print of that agreement, I can’t tell you much of how the Blackbush Tribe hunts. I can tell you only this: there is warpaint, there are spears, there are laser-beacons, and there is quite a bit of blood. I found myself in awe at the transformation of Mike and the others, and even a bit at myself.

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I stayed another night in the guest lodge and Mike drove me to the airport in the morning. The ride was mostly quiet, both of us contemplative, until I asked my final question as a journalist: “What about the future?” “I’ve learned a lot during my two years here. And the most important thing is—money can’t buy you happiness. If you’re doing alright, comfortable, say 200,000 a year? Who needs any more? “And I figure, people need to figure this out on their own. If I go out and set up a franchise community, it doesn’t help those people very much. It’s like charity: if you give a man a fish, he’ll eat for a day. But if you just show him that *you* know how to fish, he’ll sink or swim.” Attempting to play along with the painfully mixed metaphor, I asked, “That’s an interesting point about what you’re doing here. Do you think that there are too many people in the world for everyone to live more naturally, like you do? How do you propose that other people might be able to follow your footsteps, without over-fishing the waters?”

Mike looked at me seriously. “I’m not going to answer that. I think we all know what needs to happen, which is that people need to shit or get off the pot.”

A week later I exchanged emails with a tribesperson who spoke with me candidly on condition of anonymity. “Forced sterilization

Slightly baffled, I walked back to Mike's hut to see how the day would go.

I found him standing over a bucket sink that was mounted to one log wall, shaving in the mirror. He seemed happy to see me.

"There you are! I was thinking a bit this morning about our conversation last night." Our eyes met in the mirror and he spoke as he ran the cordless electric razor over the section of his neck that he kept shaved. "I was thinking about tools."

My host went on to explain how tools had been slandered quite unduly by environmentalists. The real villain, he said, was an inflation of people that expanded beyond the inflation of the economy.

"But, tools, tools are productivity-enhancers. And what's more, they can be more energy-efficient. You may have noticed, for example, that we migrate by way of scooter, rather than walking or riding bicycles."

I nodded at this, for indeed I had been curious.

"It's a matter of efficiency," Mike explained to me, "the efficiency of one set of solutions over another. Let's say you're walking somewhere, or bicycling. That uses calories. And those calories have to come from somewhere. Now, for a sedentary people, slave to their agriculture, those calories can be taken from the earth by force. The more work one does as a farmer, the greater yield, right? But not so for our lifestyle. If we hunt more, the elk thin out. We have a limited ability to generate calories in a sustainable fashion from our landbase, so we need to control the amount that we hunt.

"Electricity, on the other-hand, we don't need to work as hard for. The Segway is quite an efficient machine, the Human a less efficient one. The Segway is far more adapted to our lifestyle. What's more, since we don't need to spend as much of our time hunting, we have increased productivity in the economic sphere. You see that, don't you?" Mike's eyes were glazed a bit, and I was unsure if he had gotten soap in them or if I was speaking to a madman.

I nodded weakly.

culture, this sedentary life, is actually ill-suited to the human temperament. I mean, 500,000 years of evolution can't be wrong, right?

"So the lot of us, it was still about 20 at that point, looked into our options. Most of us were telecommuters by that point anyhow, which made it easier for us to work multiple jobs. A couple of the Seattle gang were real-estate brokers, and we figured that if we bought a large enough swath of land... well, the rest is history, isn't it?"

"Oh sure, it took us a hot minute to figure out exactly how to incorporate, and it caused a bit of problems in the home-life for some of the family types... You a family type? You got a wife, kids?"

I was caught off-guard by the question, so I merely shook my head.

"Yeah, me neither. I say, 'playing the game gets boring when you've got the same opponent every inning,' right? I mean, I'm not sexist or anything, right? So anyhow, a few guys got cut from the team, but we got a few wives on board. We bought the land, we got contractors to build our different homes, set up cell towers, and now we work from wherever we lay our heads at night!"

Since it was summer, where Mike lay his head at night was a queen-sized luxury mattress in a mahogany poster bed. Come fall, the tribe would roll southwards to their brick autumn homes. During the winter they rested in hobbit-hole mansions set into the south face of a hill on their property. In spring it was back north to tree houses, and the circle would continue another year.

"I've got a few things left on my action list for the night, but I'm glad we got to dialogue," Mike dismissed me politely, "and remember, tomorrow we go hunting."

I left my host and walked through the warm night to the guest-lodge, a spacious one-room house that dwarfs my small-town Oregon apartment.

Blackbush Tribe, LLC is genius in its way. They've figured out most everything for themselves. Since they space out their foraging, their game never goes scarce. Elk, wolves, turkeys, bears, badgers and even gazelles have been introduced to their land and are all doing quite well in the wild. A few team-members (a euphemism for the tribespeople here) had argued in favor of more exotic animals: Mike had vetoed all zebras, elephants and wild cats after he had requested compatibility reports from private biologists.

They travel light from town to town, but they do not live 'simply' by any stretch of the phrase. For the most part, they own four of everything: four TVs, four refrigerators, four microwaves, four copies of every book, movie, and CD. Four electric cars, for when they need to drive to the airport to have 'facetime' with their employers. Four electric razors, four sets of golf clubs. Four forges, four drill-presses, four lathes. Four spears, four compound bows. Four of near *everything*.

Each team-member owns five Segway scooters, however. They have an on-road scooter that they used for migration and four "x2" off-road scooters for foraging.

Each of their four seasonal villages generates electricity in a number of ingenious methods, from wind and solar to small water-wheels and even human-manure methane off-gassing—all installed and maintained by hired help. By the time the tribe arrives to each village, the bank of batteries is charged enough to last the season.

By use of cellular modems and their Blackberry SmartPhones, the tribe continues to work full-time jobs for companies—including Google, Viacom, Apple, and Microsoft as well as a myriad of small, behind-the-scenes tech companies. A few hold properties throughout the country, most trade stock. They all log between 40 and 60 hours of work a week.

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The next morning I woke up with the sun, as is custom among tribespeople here. I stretched out, threw off my buckskin blanket and got dressed. When I walked outside, part of the tribe was gathered at the dining pavilion.

A large non-stick pot was suspended over the cook-fire, attended by one of the few women present. She was in her late twenties, stocky and handsome with a strong jaw and a stronger gaze. Three toddlers clung to her jeans. Sue Donaldson was her name, and she came here unmarried, though she was currently engaged to a fellow Tribesperson. None of the children were hers, I soon learned as I struck up a conversation.

"We've got five married couples here, and three of them have children, one kid each. We want a second generation, sure, but no inflation."

I asked her why she felt that so few women had joined the tribe, and Sue sighed. "It's this glass ceiling bit. The women out there with drive, with initiative, are busy trying to tear that down. But what they don't realize is that the glass ceiling, now that it's been raised up somewhat, can actually be useful. I mean, who wants the stress of being a CEO? I hit upper-middle-management, and I'm happy as a PM for the LS department of my firm. I think that men have an easier time of it, realizing that they would rather live more naturally."

Sue took a sip of the wild-oat porridge from her heavy wooden spoon and smiled a bit. "But I think that more women are catching on. Women are naturally smarter than men, and when our culture catches up, it'll show."

I asked her if she was going on the hunt. She laughed.

"Oh heaven's no. The boys would be all kinds of huffy about it, and I've got too much on my plate as it is. I'm behind on a human resources funding request that I need to have in by five pacific time, and I've got these kids to watch over. And when the boys get back from the hunt, they'll be hungry."