

Interview with Tamarack Song, author of

Entering the Mind of the Tracker:

Native Practices for Developing Intuitive Consciousness and Discovering Hidden Nature

Finding a few moments to meet with Tamarack Song depends on anything from the weather to how many people are already lined up to see him. The man is in constant motion: with 38 men, women, teenagers, and children fully immersed in his year-long Wilderness Guide Program, along with overseeing the staff and being an integral part of the intentional community that runs the Teaching Drum Outdoor School, Tamarack is either meeting with people, writing, or guiding every moment of the day. Rumor has it that he does sleep on occasion; however, it's hard to verify, as people find him up and about no matter how early they're awake.

This morning I ended up being fourth in the line of people who want to meet with Tamarack. I wait in his small, very simple kitchen, which is no more than a sink, a few counters, two hot plates, and a toaster oven. I take a moment to appreciate the minimalism of this home, reminiscent of a wilderness lodge: antler coat hangers, willow and birch bark baskets cradling a variety of wild craftwork materials, along with pens, paper, and cooking utensils. Furs cover the floors; the fire crackles. The house is conspicuously without furniture.

*When my turn comes up, Tamarack invites me to join him in front of the fire by casually patting the sheepskin rug beside the one he's on. I arranged for this interview to get the story behind *Entering the Mind of the Tracker*. Having known Tamarack for several years and having become very familiar with his writing, I was surprised at how distinct this book is from anything he has previously written or published.*

Entering the Mind of the Tracker is a collection of Tamarack's tracking stories that were transcribed from live recordings. The stories center on his life as both a teacher and student of

tracking. He goes into great detail about intuitive and technical tracking, and he includes natural history and teaching techniques he learned from Indian elders. The stories clearly illustrate core themes of Tamarack's approach to being a tracker, such as avoiding assumptions and remembering to step back and gain perspective, while touching lightly but reverently on larger issues of human relationship with the natural world. Most especially, I appreciate the intimate view of Tamarack's inner thoughts and feelings that he weaves throughout the stories. I decided that I'd ask him a few questions about it, and record the conversation here for his readers.

LEAH: Tamarack, what is your purpose in writing and publishing these tracking stories? They're very different from what you've previously published. Why these stories, and why now?

TAMARACK: First, these are my personal stories: reminiscences of my adventures in tracking. They are very dear to me, and I wished to share them.

Second, this fulfills my role as a guide rather than a teacher. There are many technical books out there, but not much on the old, intuitive way of tracking—one that doesn't use field guides as a main source of information. Instead, this approach draws upon our intuitive voices, our ancestral memories, and our genetically imprinted predisposition to track, more than upon our rational capacities.

The stories illustrate how to help get trackers connected to the true teachers: the wind, the landscape, the animals themselves. They're all part of the greater track: the myriad clues and signs that speak to the tracker. This isn't something you learn from a workshop or a technical manual on tracking.

LEAH: The stories are intriguing because they are real. But you chose to do purely story format to convey the essence of tracking, as opposed to classic field guides. Why?

TAMARACK: Stories are how we learn, how our ancestors learned. They have adventure, mystery, humor, and tragedy. They're a great way to share all kinds of helpful and often seldom-found information on ecological systems, animal behavior, and human nature. Also threaded throughout are insights into the mind of a seasoned tracker and wilderness guide.

Stories are life, which makes it possible--challenging, but possible--to convey the bigger picture of tracking: how it's a part of our evolutionary past and imprinted in our DNA, and how it's every bit as alive and useful now as it was to our hunter-gatherer ancestors.

I'm hoping these stories will stir the heart of any reader, whether he be a novice, an experienced tracker, or an old veteran. People can relate to the characters in stories who are going through the same stages of learning as they are. These stories make tracking accessible to the novice, as well as offering helpful advice for even the most experienced tracker and tracking instructors.

So, while this book is a collection of stories, it is also very much a how-to book, not just romantic stories of tracking adventures. It gives step-by-step guidance on solving the puzzles and riddles the tracker faces. And it does it by both complementing and expanding beyond the technical field manuals that are already out there.

LEAH: Many of these stories meander and jump around. These are transcribed stories – so I assume this is just how the stories came out. How do you maintain the feel and spirit of an authentic oral story when it's written out on the page like this?

TAMARACK: Stories have the power to bring the subtle nuances of tracking straight to the reader. Stories in the oral tradition don't come in neat, segmented blocks. There's a spontaneous element, and they're geared to the audience, on the spot. They're as complex as life, like a web, with all of these strands coming together from different angles. But when you step back and gain perspective, you see how it all comes together.

Personal stories may have tangents, but they're very related and one might not at first be privy to that relativity. A story might be told about the now, but it might trigger a relating memory. This is one of the things I wish to share.

An oral story conveys the reality of a situation much more realistically than a polished story does with an editing process where much of the rawness of the moment gets lost for the sake of flow. Oral stories are as close to the memory of the storyteller as possible.

For these stories, I mostly told the stories the night of the event into a tape recorder, and from there, transcribed them into what you see on the page. The only changes that were made were very small bits here and there to make them readable. A transition leaves a gaping hole sometimes: what's communicated with body language, as well as taking into account the primary knowledge of the audience are considerations for translating an oral story onto the page. Text was added to keep it flowing. Natural pauses need to find their place. This must be as minimal as possible to retain the spirit of the story.

LEAH: Using the oral tradition is already a unique aspect of these stories. How does this book compare to other tracking story books you've seen out there, and that we have in our library?

TAMARACK: I'm afraid I know of only a few books of tracking stories that are contemporary and non-fiction. A couple of the books are great reading: they're inspiring; but they're not real practical as training guides, because not everyone has the opportunity to live with and learn from a Native elder. *Entering the Mind of the Tracker* is a collection of real stories of real people, just like the reader, discovering the here and now, today. They're learning practical things that virtually anyone can do in any natural area on their own or with peers, not necessarily with a guide.

The fact that this book takes a different tack makes it a good one to use as a companion book, *in addition* to the other animal behavior and tracking guides that are out there. Instructors will be able to use the stories as blueprints for outdoor experiences, by guiding students through the same scenarios as in the stories. The story scenarios will lead to discoveries and awarenesses that students can take home with them. I think a strong point of this book is that it complements other books by opening students up to the bigger picture on tracking, something that most tracking books aren't designed to offer.

LEAH: I see the difference; it's very empowering for readers this way. But there are other tracking story books out there, right? How does this one differ from all of them?

TAMARACK: There are so many out there: African safari stories, tiger hunting stories from India, old stories from the trapping and varmint-hunting heyday in this country, mountain man stories, biographies of Indian scouts, but very little written by contemporary trackers for a contemporary audience. Modern people are a unique audience, with their own challenges and questions, like how to feel at home in the wilderness when they can't get out there very often,

how to understand animals that they seldom if ever see, and how to get better at tracking without spending much money or having to remember so much technical information.

LEAH: These stories are told from your perspective, the guide. On one level, you're guiding the students in the story, and on another, you're guiding your readers through the experience by adding your own inner thoughts, and sometimes, some side information. Could you talk a little bit about this?

TAMARACK: First, it offers insights into the challenges or walls of a tracking student and how to walk around them. Second, it shows the inner workings of an experienced tracker's mind. Basically, the stories offer a number of different doorways for every reader. Third, we learn best through stories; so when we can step into the shoes of the characters and become the discoverer in the story, it reduces the distance between the teacher and the student. It pulls what we read into the realm of personal reality and empowers our own inner guide.

These are very personal stories, where I share some of my inner feelings and the way my mind works, so it's a kind of intimate sharing that I haven't done in my other writings. A teacher doesn't usually lay out his inner processes. These stories do that, outlining what the considerations are for each teaching experience and how I gear my approach to the needs of a specific student. This is the natural way of guiding: one-on-one and in the context of real relationships. The story medium allows me to show this inner process and level of awareness.

LEAH: What other problems in tracking do you address in this book, and how do you solve them? What confusion do you wish to clarify?

TAMARACK: There's a general misunderstanding over what tracking is. Most people view it as a skill that can be learned, and you can train for it, just like other professions. This book reveals how tracking is an innate skill that needs only to be brushed off and tuned up. It's done, as the book shows, by developing auxiliary skills and awarenesses such as sensory and intuitive acuity, along with a questioning mind as opposed to a deductive mind. The last point is important because when we set out to find answers and draw conclusions, we tend to make assumptions and close down to other possibilities.

These skills enable us to experience what I call Becoming, which is a process of envisioning a scenario from the animal's perspective, to know his inner motivations and feelings. The stories offer step-by-step guidance on how to shed our human skin and slip into an animal's. We can then directly experience the forces that drive the animal, such as hunger, fear, the need for shelter, and the urge to reproduce. Being able to envision situations means we don't have to be there when they happen, which eliminates a major limitation to growing as a tracker. The better we know the animal, the better we're able to anticipate his movements, and the more effective trackers we'll be.

Here the role of a traditional guide is essential. However, that guide does not have to be human, which is explained in the book. Traditional guiding helps students find their own power, their own way; and how to function independently. It's a very important skill for a tracker or hunter, who is out there alone most of the time.

LEAH: It seems like the larger difference between *Entering the Mind of the Tracker* and other books on tracking is that you approach tracking through the animal, rather than through a purely human and/or technical perspective. Is that right?

TAMARACK: Maybe to some degree. There are other books that also cover the Native-immersion approach, and a couple of them present it quite well. One thing that distinguishes this book is that this style of tracking is presented purely through story, and story has the unique ability to break down barriers. In this case, it's between human-kind and nature. When the barrier is gone, we automatically become more effective trackers. And it helps with more than bringing home the meat: we become more functional people in general.

If this book is different in any way, I like to think it's because of its focus on connecting with our evolutionary heritage. That's what awakens the abilities that have helped our kind live in balance throughout our ancestral past. It's said that "To know you is to love you." The exercises in this book help us to really know a natural environment. What we know, we cherish, and what we cherish, we take care of. If we can know the animals we track, we'll take them respectfully, and we'll be taking care of the entire habitat, or what I call the Hoop of Life.

LEAH: So many people know you as an experienced guide. What life experiences contribute to how you track and guide both budding and seasoned trackers now?

TAMARACK: I grew up with the woods as my backyard, and I was lucky enough to learn the ways of the forest through my mother and grandmother. Later, I traveled all over the country to learn nature awareness and observational skills from Indian Elders: Ojibwe, Black Foot, Hopi and Lakota. During that time of my life, which lasted fifteen years, I lived almost exclusively in the woods, without electricity. I stayed in a little A-frame and a wigwam, and I learned directly from the animals that I lived among. Back then there weren't any tracking courses, and I didn't have any books to learn from. Still, I didn't feel deprived; in fact, I didn't give it a second thought; I was *there*.

During that time, I spent several years in relationship with a pack of Wolves. In the old days, the Indians would go to Wolf to learn the skills of the hunt, and I did the same. As teachers, they greatly influenced my tracking, and they inspire me to this day--so much so that I dedicate the book to their memory. In the dedication I relate my experience of becoming a pack member.

About twenty years ago I felt ready to start sharing what I had learned. And still I've continued to be a student, constantly developing my own skills, along with the ability to train others. It all comes together in this book of stories.

LEAH: It sounds like this book is a very personal one. Who were you writing for when you wrote this book? Who do you think will get the most out of it?

TAMARACK: Of course, as we've already talked about, tracking students could get a lot from the book. Long-time and professional trackers can gain from what might be a whole new perspective, and will perhaps pick up a few tricks of the trade. They may even find a unique approach that can help them become more effective and proficient as trackers and teachers.

Teachers of all kinds, as well as naturalists, can learn how to use a highly effective traditional teaching technique: guiding a person to find her own answers in her own way. Unfortunately, it's often disregarded in this day of one-size-fits-all education. The technique helps students to be involved in the process rather than expecting someone else to pour in information. The book will easily double as a teacher's guide, because you can duplicate the scenarios in the story quite easily.

Natural history buffs and nature lovers in general will appreciate the animal lore and ecological insights on hunting, gathering, nesting, and reproduction. The story format puts this

information into the context of exploration as well as entertainment, not just through dry facts but through the stories of actual trackers and actual animals, out in the wild.

LEAH: Is there anything you'd like your readers to know before they read the stories?

TAMARACK: Don't skip the introduction, and take a look at the appendices, they're an important part of the book. Some readers will be coming from a certain set of experiences, and the introduction and appendices help set the stage for the stories.

The interviewer, Jessica Leah Moss, is a former creative writing and literature teacher who is now on staff as chief editor at the Teaching Drum Outdoor School.