

Trumpeter (1997)

ISSN: 0832-6193

False Fronts: The View from Gregory Bald, Great Smoky
Mountain National Park

Alan Furth
Trumpeter

ALAN FURTH is Senior Faculty Associate with the Audubon Expedition Institute (AEI). The position allows him the opportunity to teach for one semester and work administratively with the school's Education Division, in their Belfast office, during the other half of the year. He holds a BS in Child Development from the University of Maine and an MS in Experiential Education from Lesley College. In the span of his nineteen years in education he has taught at every level, from preschool through Elderhostels including eight years in a public middle school and nine years at the high school, undergraduate and graduate levels with AEI. He is generally an optimistic person and he reminds readers of the this essay to find, create and sing the songs of hope and strength along with those of protest and identification of unacceptable conditions, and to find those places where vital breezes swirl and stir passion and reverence for life. He and his family live in Lubec, Maine, the easternmost town in the continental United States.

False Fronts

(Sung and played to the tune of Banks of the Ohio)

C G

1. I sit here in the graying light

C

As winter cloaks the empty night

C7 F

And barren mountains wail and sigh

. C G C

Lamenting days now long gone by

\textbf{Refrain:}

Gone the red wolves, gone the vision

Gone the truths of our condition

Free us from false fronted lies

Give us strength, no alibis

2. A pale moon lights this tortured scene

Of wolfless wolves ripped from their sleep
These hounded dead are forced to keep
Alive our hope - our conscience clean
3. Within the bounds of this zoo park
This futile fragment - hopeless ark
Reign rules relentless as storm tossed seas
Remain confined, believe you're free
4. One step too far, you're bound and gagged
A bullet through your mortal hide
Or bring you back for show and tell
A puppet's life, a one wolf's hell
5. I see no reason to believe
This land will get its just reprieve
The human tide can't be held down
The sunset glows through acrid gown
6. On hilltops now the bones are bleached
Of trees where once their branches reached
Toward heaven and the trusted peach
Of good clean air, but life's a beach
\textbf{Talking blues:}
Ain't that the truth
I can hear those poor beasts now
Howling from their prison walls
Tagged, tattooed, caught and caged,
Anaesthetized, delupinized,
Inspected inside and out.
Photo ID'ed, collared and monitored.
Try to break free and they'll triangulate
on you. Its all over then. I can
hear that low flying helicopter now,
slicing through the nicotine-stained
skyline that looks more deadly than
any pool hall haze I've seen,
tracking a wild wannabe.
7. We're farming reindeer, elk and salmon,
Forests, deer, red wolves and bison
Snow white ermine for their skins
Please forgive us for our sins...

False Fronts is not a very uplifting song, but I believe it is an important one. I was feeling pretty angry and discouraged the day I wrote it. Here's the reason why.

This past fall I travelled with an Audubon Expedition Institute (AEI) group of graduate and undergraduate students and my co-faculty through three distinct regions of North America: the western coast of Newfoundland, Pennsylvania's

Lancaster County and Eastern Tennessee's Great Smoky Mountain National Park. We ended the semester of intensive field study in Tennessee, the region where, in 1972, I started my undergraduate studies. I have taught with AEI for a period which spans eighteen years. Environmental conditions, issues and concerns has been one focus throughout the journeying. This year the conditions in each place we explored struck a hard chord.

In Newfoundland, as readers of this journal probably know (it is not new news) the cod fishery has collapsed. We listened to a fishery specialist point an accusatory finger at the traditional fishing folk and justify proposal of practices which are sure to drive small boat fishermen out of business - once it gets started up again. The mayor of the small town spoke to deaf ears as he tried to point out the obvious results. His strong voice echoed as nothing in the system. In Lancaster County, traditional heart of the Amish and Mennonite Plain People, fertile farmland tracts are being lost at auction to urban sprawl developers and townhouses march across fields which had known nothing in recent centuries but horse hooves and plowshares. Pressure to make the absolute most of every acre of remaining farmland has forced sustaining practices to yield to the new. Pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilizers guarantee monocrops and cash returns. Black plastic rolls out acre upon acre, and in one short decade the old ways are lost. And the first night of our stay in the beautiful jewel of Great Smoky Mountain National Park we heard the Red Wolves howl.

How does the splendor of the wolves' existence twine with the dismal report? Through research done by one of our students we got the inside scoop on the status of the wolf reintroduction. There are wolves who now roam the park lands, but hidden not far from the campground is a fenced enclosure of wayward wolves. "The free ones seem to like to get the penned ones going," our student was told about the nightly chorus by the researcher who welcomed his questions. Details beyond that are contained in my song. I felt duped by the location of the penned wolves that ensured the nightly chorus close to the greatest concentration of park visitors. The fact that the wolves who carried on wolf lives on the other side of the park boundary would be identified as "problems" and "dealt with" to ensure the comfort and confidence of surrounding human populations made the park suddenly seem very small. It took on a human serving air for the first time for me and I didn't like it.

I wrote "False Fronts" during a seven day backpack in the National Park. It was the day after a long strenuous climb had brought the group I was with up to the 5,000 foot summit of Gregory Bald, one of the curious mountain top fields that exist uniquely within this mountain range. The bald offered a striking panoramic view in every direction. Northeast to southwest ran the great crest of the Southern Appalachian Mountains. To the southeast the clear, late afternoon sky invited the eyes to explore the intricate and boundless sea of mountains. The stark winter clad hillside silhouettes displayed the classic distance distinguishing characteristic of dark foreground yielding through every

shade of gray until the pale, pale blue of sky blended with the most distant ripples of ridge line.

It was the westward gaze, toward my old almamatre Maryville College that unnerved me. Maryville sits at the leading edge of the mighty Great Smoky Mountain thrust fault, where the thinning overburden of ancient rock runs out across the eastern edge of the Mississippi Valley like a shore spent wave upon a beach. I have not gazed out from Gregory Bald for twenty-five years and I don't recall the burnt orange scar that now courses the horizon. It was a clear, cool late fall day with none of the mechanics to precipitate such a dreaded haze, yet there it lay, inextricably part of the valley, as true as day, or death, or a coal tattoo.

The toxic swath was more than a stain. Its substance displaced the lower column of clean air. It is quantifiable: You could measure it by the vessel it fills. This hydrocarbon haze fills the entire Tennessee Valley to a depth of one thousand feet. I imagine this thick, heavy mass of contaminated air flows, glacier-like, into other toxic basins that mark high concentrations of North American consumers who flank the industrial belts of the United States heartland.

The margins are getting thin. In Florida, the site of other explorations with AEI, our freshwater aquifers are pumped away to fuel industry, agriculture and outrageous population densities, and salt water domes move in to fill the void. Salt water is more dense than fresh and cannot be displaced. The freshwater carrying capacity of the land is irreparably diminished. On Gregory Bald I looked out and wondered, where is our clean air? How opaque does the proverbial writing on the wall need to be? What does it take to turn the tide?

False fronts and smoke screens need to be torn down. We build them and fool ourselves. The week before the hike I lay in a field on the Maryville College campus and never considered the poisons carried on the gently stirring breezes. I had to return to the familiar vantage of Gregory Bald, seeking solitude in wilderness, in order to realize once again, the stark reality of our condition and imagine the scope of the work to be done.

I did not come to the backcountry looking for this. I sought wholeness and encounters with self and Black Bear, Nuthatch and Great Horned Owl, Red Wolf and the night sky. I envisioned myself nestled in a Rhododendron bald or sitting with my back pressed against the trunk of a towering Hemlock with its soft flowing branches fanning like gills above my head as I savored the mountain chorus of wind through trees and steep valleys twined with the chortle of all sizes of cascading streams.

But, last night I heard one lone wolf and the hair on the back of my neck did not go up. I felt no awe and no reverence. Instead I grew angry. I felt manipulated and confined. The red wolf is dead. We killed it and are not about to let its resurrection become more than a parkland attraction. It is so hard to wade

through the mazes of political, environmental, social and commercial facades, but that is the first work to do. That is our work here: to tear down the false fronts of our existence and deal with what is.

Citation Format

Furth, Alan (1997) *False Fronts: The View from Gregory Bald, Great Smoky Mountain National Park Trumpeter*: 14, 2. <http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.14.2.6>

Document generated from IXML by ICAAP conversion macros.
See the [ICAAP](#) web site or [software repository](#) for details