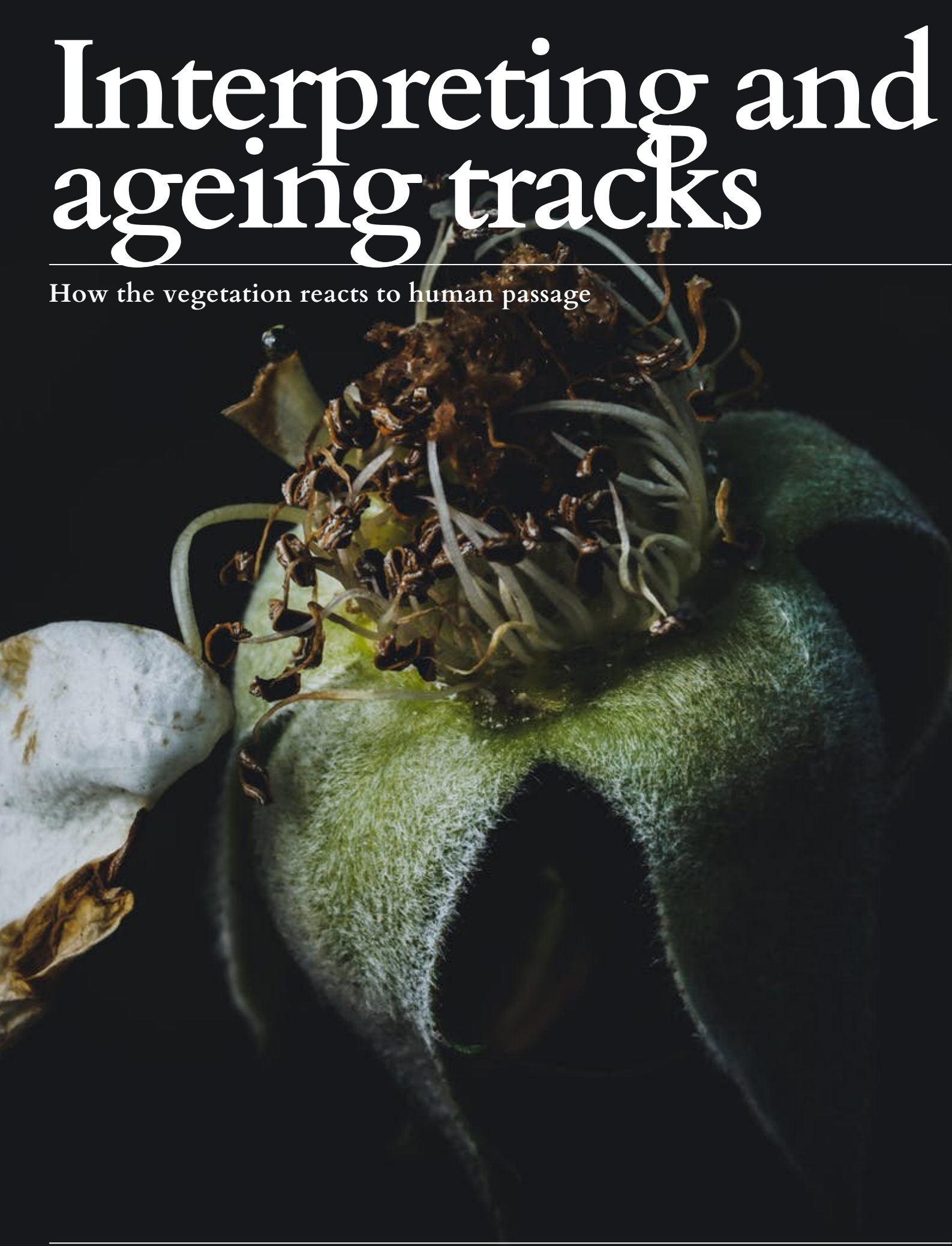
Interpreting and ageing tracks

How the vegetation reacts to human passage



A SHORT ESSAY BY KYT LYN WALKEN, 2023

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KYT LYN WALKEN

"*I love Kyt's passion for Mantracking.*
This girl is on fire"
Joel Lambert, 10 year Veteran of Navy SEAL Teams

Kyt Lyn Walken is an authentic enthusiast and trader of the Ancient Art of Human and Animal Tracking. This skill is still very effective nowadays from Search and Rescue, Tactical dimension, Forensic Science until Wildlife Conservation.

She has been entitled "Official Representative of Hull's Tracking School" in 2018.
Mike Hull is her Mentor.
In the same year she has become a Conservation Ranger after attending a two weeks course in Poland led by C.R.O.W. (Conservation Rangers Operations Worldwide).
Kyt Lyn has also studied "Forensic Photographs on Crime Scene", by UK Forensic Advisor and former Royal Marines Robert Kendall.

Currently she runs Man and Animal Tracking courses all over Europe, and she is regular writer for some US and UK webzines on Survival and Prepping.

She has been entitled "Directora de la Escuela de Rastreo Humano Carcayú - Spain". She is Guest Instructor for Veteranen Search Team (The Netherlands).

She is author of the Manuals "*The importance of being a Tracker***", "***The Urban Tracker***" and "***Tracking Compendium***" (with Andy Martin), "***Jungle Warriors - SAS in Malesia and Borneo***" and the essay "***Tracking, Anti-Tracking and Counter-Tracking during Colonialism***" (with Professor Timothy J.Stapleton).**

www.thewayoftracking.com

Overview on interpreting and aging tracks

"*There are many forces that work to restore the land to its original form once it has been scarred by the movement of a human being. Knowing what some of these forces are, how they work, and how fast they work allows us to more accurately determine when the person we are tracking made his mark on the landscape.*"
(**Jac**k Kearney, *Tracking A Blueprint for Learning How*, Pathway Press, 1999).

Interpreting and determing the exact age of any impression made on any given surface is really tough, even for experienced Trackers.
Experience is what really makes the difference in this process, no matters if the tracks have been left by humans, animals and/or vehicles
Several are the factors which must be considered.

Basically, aging a track means to approximately determine the time in which that has been made. The word "approximately" hasn't been picked up by chance.
If there is a lack on any specific detail that could help us to make clearance about the exact time frame of creation of a print, additional aids should be looked for in other elements.

Starting from an immediate example, let's consider a clear footprint left on an ideal terrain, the so called "*Track Traps*".
This terminology, peculiar to the Art of Tracking, refers to any kind of ground in which anyone can easily see, identify and follow tracks. This cluster includes: sandy soil, muddy soil, marked out by the presence of a soft terrain, with the proper percentage of humidity which can allow the retention of any type of prints.

If we spot a track left on the above mentioned surface, and by observing it carefully, we spot small, round holes on it, we can easily say that the author passed before the rainfall.
Infact, the action of a light rain aged the track in that specific way.
The small, rounded pitfalls are a crystal clear example of that.

Nonetheless, what exactly happened when we have no clues about the precipitations?
Every dedicated Tracker should be acquainted with the environment he/she is tracking in.
Looking for spoors requires, infact, not only a good sight, but a right attitude to gain informations.
It's all about"making intelligence".

By saying that, before commencing any follow up – no matter the application he/she is focused on, Tactical, Search and Rescue, Forensic, Antipoaching and so on – the starting point should always being the same: collecting informations, especially if the trackline happens to be pretty old.

The list of informations will include:

-the past weather conditions occurred in that specific area
-the existing weather conditions
-the type of ground (sandy, muddy, leafy, craggy, and so on)
-any presence of contamination of the area by people, animals, vehicles
-the presence (or not) to urbanization
-informations about the fauna
-informations about the flora

(Not to mention, of course, any data related to the subject of the follow up and or the numbers involved, in a party and so on).

All the above informations are mandatory for a Tracker, as they turn themselves to be extremely helpful in the delicate process of aging the trackline.

All the elements which are connected to fauna and flora occurs to be of priceless importance: if you are aware with local fauna habits, then you can determine when the subject passed in point X.

Let's take spiders, for example: they mainly commit themselves to the creation of their webs during the night, so if you are making your way into a narrowed trail full of them and you are following a normal seize individual, well, this certainly means you are not on the right trackline.

Or, which is even worse, you "forced" the tracks, chasing someone – or something – which surely not have crossed that certain place.

Overview on interpreting and aging tracks

This is obviously just a case. By identifying the ordinary trails used by ungulates, you have the chance to observe any over-imposion of tracks and determine which is the older by simply seeing which tracks lays down all the others. This is aging as well.

On weather conditions

Weather conditions play an intrisic part in the phase od deterioration of the tracks.

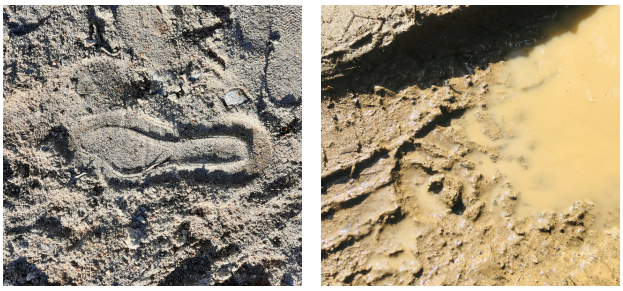
- Wind erases signs. A Tracker should always take into consideration also the wind speed and duration). Wind can also blow the grass straight back to its natural position.
Fresh tracks left on dry track traps could also appear older.

- Frost makes and maintains tracks so sharp that they seem even soft.

- Rain afflicts upper, lower vegetation and ground too. It can drag mud, debris..

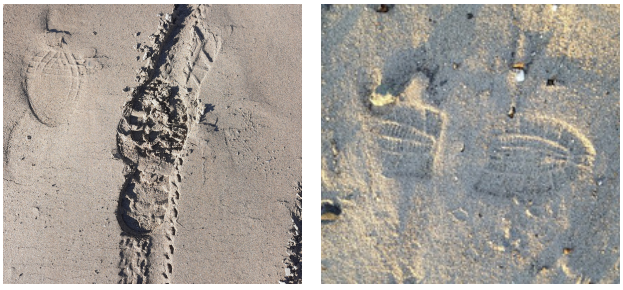
- Heat makes everything older

- Humidity makes fresh and older tracks appear quite the same (except for rotting vegetation)



From top left to bottom right:

- approx. 1 day old track
- approx. 45 minutes old track
- approx. 30 minutes old track
- approx. 20 minutes old track



From top left to bottom right:

- approx. 30 minutes old track
- approx. 1 day old track
- very fresh track
- approx. 30 minutes old track

Overview on interpreting and aging tracks

On flora.

"*The best way to tell the age of a track is by determining what it does to live vegetation. Grass, plants, bushes, and trees are all alive and like all living things, when injured, immediately start repairing themselves. We are all very familiar with the healing process in human beings and can easily tell an old scar from a fresh bleeding wound. We can tell fairly accurately by the scabbing process if a cut has occurred within the last two hours, but 97 98 Tracking: A Blueprint For Learning How the older the injury the more difficult it is to set time limits on when it might have occurred. We can usually tell if it falls within a time frame of more than twelve hours but less than three days old, probably more than three days but less than two weeks, etc. ~ very similar healing process takes place with live vegetation and by_ studying the particular vegetation in your area you can easily learn to tell if an injury has occurred within a fe~ hours, from several hours to within a day, etc. "(Jack Kearney, Tracking A Blueprint for Learning How, Pathway Press, 1999).*

Best way to Age tracks is to determine what it does to live vegetation.

All plants, after being injured, start to repair themselves and they reconquer their natural position, searching for direct sunlight.

This process, influenced and triggered by the resilience of the plant, takes more time in humid areas, where light is scarce or quite absent.

The term "resilience" was first used in the botanical / biological field, in the 1970s, by Canadian ecologist Crawford Stanley Holling.

The more we when bruises abecome familiar with an area and her flora, the fastest - and smartest - we become in identifying when such "injuries" occurred to a specific plant.
Remember that the fresher the break, the lighter will appear.

By these signs, in fact, we can determine the approximate age of a track.

By practing, you will be amazed by two main elements: the amount of informations you will gain by the mere (and humble) observation of what surrounds you, and the speed you will reach by following a solid reasoning.
In the next article we will go deeper into the effect of current weather conditions on the process of aging tracks and we will analyze the meaning of Tom Brown' Pressure Releases inside the dynamic of a follow up.

Very fresh track left on muddy terrain.
Notice the centripetal force which makes the track appears bigger and deeper.

Overview on interpreting and aging tracks

Aging of sign is a complex skill that requires substantial training.

In order to become proficient, we need to:

- to build a solid, mental database on how tracks appear in different weather conditions and inside a determined area

- to index (by placing your own footprint next to the sign to compare as well as for aerial spoors)

- to look for degree of decay or erosion. in this way exposure, typology of substrate and weather conditions will indicate decay.

- to never determine age from one sign alone! Keep in mind tocompare the trackline including different sign and/or prints with several different exposure and texture in order to estimate age.

- be familiar with the plants and their "resilience"

- bear in mind that Transfer provides good indicators. water splashes, mud or transfer of dust will dry out faster than natural settled substrates as it is per definition "UNNATURAL".

- Washing off of smaller soil or dust particles on leaves on the ground can indicate you time since last rain.

- check for dew or rain.

- to use our fingertips to feel the vegetation.

- to know that erratic ants' activities when a rock has been disloged can last for around 40 minutes.

- to know that flies remain stick to feces for at least 30 minutes.

Some plants are more suitable to capture and to retain tracks.
From top left to bottom right:

Reynoutria japonica
Allium ursinum
Equisetum
Verbascum