



Video Story Transcript

Chinese New Year's Frogs: A Collision of Culture and Nature

By: Storyteller Linda Yemoto
www.facebook.com/linda.yemoto

Link to YouTube Video:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8txbWQ_qnQ

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, I'm Linda Yemoto. And for many years I worked as a park naturalist at a nature center in the hills of Berkeley, California. And I want to share with you an incident that happened and that brought home to me how cultural differences and beliefs and practices can have unintended environmental consequences. But first I begin with a very brief folktale.

Long, long ago in China, a Buddhist monk was traveling from temple to temple. One day, his travels took him deep into the forest where he came upon a small, wild pig that had been captured in a hunter's trap. Now, the pig was squealing and squealing with fear. And the monk felt compassion for the pig and so, he released it. Now, according to the laws of the time, that monk was guilty of theft. Now, when the matter was brought to the attention of the Buddha, the Buddha pondered for a bit and then said, "According to the Dharma, the teachings, the monk is not guilty for he acted out of compassion." And that simple act of releasing the pig over hundreds and hundreds of years became a Buddhist practice called fang sheng. The releasing into the wild of an animal that would otherwise be eaten.

Now, fast forward about 2,000 years, a Saturday, in February 1994, five minutes until closing time. As the naturalist on duty at the Nature Center that day, it had been pretty busy. Lots of nature walks and snake talks and puppet shows. And we were ready for the day to be over. We were just about ready to lock the glass doors of the nature center, when a visitor came rushing in from outside rather out of breath saying, "There's a big group of Asian-Americans walking down the road to Jewel Lake."

"OK," I thought.

"They're carrying two big, cardboard boxes."

“OK,” I thought.

“Full of bullfrogs.”

“Oh, no,” I thought.

“And they're going to release them into the lake.”

“Oh, no!” So, I asked Lauren, one of our interpretive student aides to lock up the building. Eveline, the other one, and I jumped into the park truck, drove down to the lake as quickly as we could. And all the time I'm thinking, “What the heck do they think they're doing? Don't they know bullfrogs are not native to California? Don't they know what's going to happen when they release them? Oh, I hope I can get here on time.”

So, we parked the truck and strode up to the lake and sure enough there were probably 20 or more Chinese Americans standing around the edge of the lake. They were chanting; they were singing. They were looking very happy for all these bullfrogs that were hopping around their feet and swimming away across the lake.

“Who's in charge here?” I asked.

“Ah, I guess, I am,” a middle-aged man approached me. “Ah, why?”

“Ah, well,” I said. “I guess you didn't realize that bullfrogs are not native to California and when you release them into an environment like this, they can completely decimate our little native Pacific Chorus frog population. You see, bullfrogs can get as big as dinner plates. And they will swallow anything they can get their mouths around. So, there go our frogs, our snake, our fish.”

“Oh, no!” said the man. “We didn't know! We had no idea. But,” he said, “we didn't release the turtles that we bought.”

“Oh, good,” I said. “What do you mean, ‘turtles that you bought?’”

“Well, we went down to Oakland, Chinatown, to two different markets.” And they bought as many bullfrogs as they could possibly afford. And then they brought them down to Jewel Lake to release, in celebration of Chinese New Year. They were practicing fang sheng.”

“Oh,” I said. “How many bullfrogs do you think you bought?”

“Oh, maybe two hundred,” he said.

“Oh.”

With much apologies, they said they would take their turtles and they would leave the park. They didn't look like they wanted to touch the bullfrogs, much less help us recapture them. But Eveline and I looked at each other and looked at all these frogs hopping about and some of them did not look too good. They're kind of hopping sideways and flipping over. And you can capture some of them pretty easily. So, she and I decided that the best thing to do would be, we had to recapture as many bullfrogs as we could that night before they had a chance to recover.

Now, luckily, Eveline's family lived close to the park and they owned two kayaks. So, she rushed home to get the kayaks. I went back to the office and called my family, told my husband what had happened. He turned to our two boys, their ages 7 and 4 at the time, and said “Hey, do you want to help your mom catch bullfrogs tonight?”

“Yeah!” they said. So, they came on down.

I think we spent six hours on the lake that night. Eveline and Lauren were in the kayaks. They were each holding a flashlight in their teeth. And they were paddling slowly around the lake. When they'd spot a bullfrog they'd shine the light in its eyes, which stuns it. They'd put down the paddle, pick up a long-handled net and scoop the bullfrog out of the water. And then they'd stick it in a garbage bag, which was at their feet inside the kayak.

Now, that worked pretty well until I saw the bullfrogs started getting loose. And I could hear them across the lake, "Ooo, aaah, ooof!" I was in a small flat bottom row boat with my two boys. They had their flashlights. I had the net and their father was very slowly rowing us around the lake. Well, about 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, we decided we had to quit. We had recaptured 98 of the 200 bullfrogs. We put them in two large, five-gallon tubs with lids, put the lids into a storage room in the nature center, and we went home for the night.

Now, unfortunately, during the night those bullfrogs were hopping so vigorously against the lids they popped them open. So, when I opened the storage door there were those bullfrogs all over the place. We had to recapture them, put them in their tubs, put on the lids a little more tightly, and we took them down to the East Bay Vivarium, which is a store that raises and sells amphibians and reptiles. Now, they knew they couldn't sell the bullfrogs but they were thrilled to have them because they were going to freeze them, which is actually a humane way of killing the frogs. And then, over time they were going to feed them to a large South American snake that they owned.

Now, as Chinese New Year's rolled around again the next year, we knew we had to do something. We couldn't let this happen again. So, we posted some signs that said, "We honor your practice of fang sheng but releasing of any animals into our regional parks is strictly prohibited. And we appreciate your cooperation." But we also got in contact with some of the larger Chinese Buddhist churches in the area. And we had a really good discussion with them about their Chinese New Year's practices and what happens when you release non-native animals into the environment. And I think, in the end, we had a much better understanding of each other's perspective. However, it did take us over 10 years to get rid of those Chinese New Year's bullfrogs and all their generations and generations of offspring.

Now, you may wonder, "Well how do you know you got rid of all those frogs?" Well, bullfrogs sound like, **Ba-rump! Ba-rump! Ba-rump!** And our little native chorus frog, they have that more classic *ribbet, ribbet, ribbet, ribbet, ribbet, ribbet*. So, for years you go down to the lake and you would hear mostly **Ba-rump!** with a little bit of *ribbet*. But now if you go down to Jewel Lake on a spring or summer evening, you'll hear not a single **Ba-rump!** But just *ribbet, ribbet, ribbet, ribbet, ribbet, ribbet*.