

On The Land

“Problems cannot be solved within the mindset that created them.”

Albert Einstein

Throughout history, people have been busy altering the environment, yet the human relationship with the land has often been a source of contention. Interpretations and explanations of our kinship with the earth abound in religious traditions, mythological representations, storytelling, and political or religious claims to sacred ground and holy lands.

While the planet is relentlessly resculpted by extraction and development, national and international boundaries are being realigned due to broken treaties, colonialism, wars, imperialism, genocide, and battles in the name of god. The environmental issues facing us today are not so new as much as momentous.

The earth is prodigious. We walk on it, fish and swim in its waters, hunt on it, coexist upon it, drive over it, climb it, build on it, take our food from it, and bury in it. In the last several hundred years, we have begun to treat the land as a commodity, an instrument for economic expansion.

For many this is the only use that matters.

The planet sustains our being through the resources it provides. A critical dimension of environmental concern is the link between economic growth and consumption of natural resources. Many of today's highly industrialized countries are applying more pressure on scarce natural resources through the spread of market economies. In the absence of non-market incentives, it is becoming clear that the private decisions of our profit-driven institutions will not solve our environmental woes.

For many political leaders and businesspeople, it seems unthinkable, if not preposterous, that the future cannot be secured by using the same methods and models that have been successful in the past. The fact of the matter is, as with any economic activity, there is always the risk that what once worked may not work now.

There is not a businessperson around, or at least not one who has been around long, who would not make dramatic changes in production after realizing that their firm was rapidly consuming the last of its scarce resources.

The environmental problems of today are momentous because they affect the entire planet, the whole of humanity and all other life forms. They are exacerbated by covetousness for the consumer lifestyle best expressed in the bombastic maxim, “I shop, therefore I am.”

Human consumption is proliferated in a dizzying array of wants. What is so perplexing about this phenomenon is that our cravings are limitless. Economic expansion, or the spread of capital, plays into this perfectly, grounded in the faith that growth and world trade will benefit everyone without exceeding the carrying capacity of a finite planet.

It would be nice if the planet were growing in tandem with our world's economies; unfortunately that is not the case. All that we human beings have is embedded within the workings of our planet. The removal of resources, their transportation and use, and their replacement with waste steadily erodes our stock of natural wealth, the sum total of the ecological systems that support life. Is it possible that we are consuming ourselves out of existence? Are we are sawing off the tree branches upon which we are perched?

The North Slope

On the Brink of Development

Human history has always been characterized by intensified efforts to harness ever-larger quantities of energy. Material progress is driven by our ability to locate energy sources, while persistently improving systems of delivery. Through the centuries our species has used sun, wood, wind, water, coal, natural gas, uranium, and, of course, oil. The basis of the world's wealth is energy. We produce and consume energy to heat and cool, process food, move around, and make war. Energy enables us to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct our surroundings. Energy is the cherished commodity, the currency of the politically and economically powerful. Access to energy determines the hierarchy of nations.

With the exception of rising oil prices and their inherent impact upon inflation, the energy economy appears to be moving along. Billions of people are enjoying an unprecedented standard of living, and many nations are wealthy. The energy industry has deftly put in place an intricate, efficient, and profitable system of oil wells, refineries, power plants, and pipelines that magically convert oil, natural gas, and coal into heat and power. For years this has nurtured the belief that the surest way to greater wealth, stability, and prosperity is to simply find new sources of energy. However, not a day goes by without a new disclosure about air pollution, climate change, toxic waste, water contaminants, oil spills, or global warming. Related maladies manifest themselves in the form of energy price hikes, shortages, blackouts, fraud, corruption, and outbreaks of war.

America's largest wilderness is the North Slope of Alaska, and it's currently up for bids to the energy industry. The argument for drilling the North Slope is an "if only" argument. If only drilling were allowed, our oil supply would be increased, thereby decreasing our dependence upon foreign oil.

We humans live by the stories we tell. Once a story has a place in our mind, we return to it again and again. For the sake of a story, we will ravage the sacred. For the sake of the money, we will surrender ourselves.

Drilling in the American West

The Aftermath

Analyzing environmental problems usually requires some understanding of systems thinking. “Systems” thinking is about examining the patterns and importance of habitats and how habitats support life. Living systems cannot come into being, develop, or prosper where there is no habitat. We might also think of living systems as being interdependent. From this perspective we could say that the planet is dynamic in all dimensions and on all scales of activity, with every action affecting and generating others in turn.

Geometric population growth, global warming, relentless consumption, and high-impact technologies combine to threaten our quality of life. The methods of resource extraction are placing in peril our already-fragile planetary ecosystems. Of enormous complexity, these occurrences compound our moral and spiritual predicament.

Locked in our egocentric perspectives and short-sighted needs, we are no longer able to value the beauty of nature and everything in it. Instead, our relationship with the land has become commercially driven by the unrestrained spread of capital, the pathological waves of consumption, and the reduction of the land to a commodity; a marionette of the money interests.

The hidden dilemma for society is that not even a steadily increasing supply of energy can alleviate the threat of scarcity, particularly when the need for energy is oriented toward consumption. This kind of society is plagued with the conflict of growing wealth from the production of energy on one hand and fear of scarcity on the other. When all that matters is the wealth produced by consumption, we have the environmental plunder we have in the American West.

One wonders if our perspective has weakened to the point that we no longer regard the land and its creatures as deserving of respect, let alone reverence. By the looks of things, the answer in many cases is a resounding *yes*.

The Pantanal

A Region in Balance

The great challenge of our time is to build, nurture, and promote sustainable communities—social, cultural, and physical environments in which we can satisfy our needs and aspirations. A sustainable community is designed in such a manner that its ways of life, businesses, physical structures, and landscapes do not interfere with nature’s inherent ability to sustain life. A basic step in this endeavor is to become “eco-literate,” to understand that the principles of organization common to all living systems have evolved to sustain the web of life.

Minimal disturbance to the wetlands of the Pantanal is a direct consequence of understanding the landscape and then treating it with reverence. As a result, the area provides rich economic benefits and a climate of connectedness.

The Pantanal has been preserved by generations of cattle ranchers who have seen this place as a whole. They’ve managed it thoughtfully and carefully for future generations.

Unspoiled grasslands equate to abundant wildlife and great viewing opportunities, leading many ranchers to discover the money that can be made via eco-tourism. Visitors come from all over the world to see flocks of macaws, giant anteaters, and maned wolves. Tourists boost the bottom lines of these ranches, employing many and helping to maintain and improve the quality of life there. It’s a perfect fit.

The Rocky Mountain Front & Great Plains

The Road to Recovery

The Rocky Mountain Front in Montana is an ecological treasure. Known as the place where the prairie meets the mountains, the ecosystem here is largely intact and unspoiled. Folks like it just fine as it is.

But natural gas reserves underneath threaten to spoil it. Energy extraction is a messy business. With more than 97 percent of area residents opposed to drilling, however, the future looks bright—for now.

It's a different story in the Great Plains. The tallgrass prairie was mostly lost to the plow more than a hundred years ago. Very little original prairie is left.

Industrial agriculture has forced producers to get big or get out. Government programs have pushed this way and that, like the tide, sometimes with little regard for environmental consequences.

But a rebirth is taking place in many areas. People are discovering new ways to make a living to supplement their farming and ranching operations. A well cared for landscape, or even one that's been restored, can provide hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, and other recreational opportunities. Wide-open spaces are at a premium these days, and visitors are willing to pay for it.

Instead of simply repeating the past, the landowners who succeed over time will often be the ones who figure out new ways to live within the land, to see all that's possible, to make the most of things. They know that sustainability is key. In that kind of creativity and spirit lies the real hope for the future.

Summation

“There is no good reason why we should fear the future, but there is every reason why we should face it seriously, neither hiding from ourselves the gravity of the problems before us nor fearing to approach these problems with the unbending, unflinching purpose to solve them aright.”

Theodore Roosevelt, 1905 Inaugural Address

We all consume. Consuming is a part of living. Harsh as it is, life devours life.

Most of us assume that the drive behind consumerism is the manufacturing of goods that will satisfy our needs and desires. We all seek a contented life. This is true on the surface, but really, consumerism is much more. It is a system for creating desires and for progressively creating dissatisfaction, which threatens the earth in an endless cycle of more.

Consider that each of us consumes our body weight every day in materials extracted and processed from farms, mines, rangelands, prairies, forests, and bodies of water—120 pounds on average. Since 1950, the consumption of energy, meat, and lumber has doubled; the use of plastic has increased fivefold; use of aluminum sevenfold; and airplane mileage per person by thirty-three times.

We now own twice as many automobiles as in 1950. With every bite, every push upon the accelerator, and every swipe of our credit card, we leave a larger ecological footprint upon the land.

A first step in mindful consumption would be to remind ourselves that every time we make a purchase or consume something—whether it be a tank of gasoline, a tiny battery, a television, an automobile, a hamburger, a paper bag to carry our groceries, or a an outfit of clothing—we are making an impact on the environment. All of us are concerned with the quality of our goods and the satisfaction that we derive from them. The mere act of making a purchase is a vote for the economic and social model that is in existence today and for a particular way of producing and distributing those goods. However the environmental impact under which all the thousands of goods at our disposal are made comes at an exorbitant price that few realize

So where do we begin? What's needed most now is the development of a land ethic across our society, one in which citizens recognize and appreciate a landscape as more than just resources waiting to be tapped.

But since true change is generational, that's a pretty tall order.

So let's take it step by step.

Do what you can to reduce, reuse and, recycle. Drive a more fuel-efficient car, or better yet, ride a bike or walk. Be an informed voter. Do whatever you can to make your environmental footprint as small as possible.

“If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, and who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

Alexander Solzhenitsyn