

Living with Losing

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You are not going to like what I am about to say, but it's the truth.

We have lost.

Those of us who have tried to save the world from the depredations of our own species? We have lost. Abbie Hoffman knew this. He put it in his suicide note. "It's too late. We can't win. They've gotten too powerful."

Aye, too powerful. More than that, too *many*. Just too many people in the world. Thomas Malthus was a rather nasty fellow, I'm told, but he was right about the consequences of overpopulation:

*The spirit of benevolence, cherished and invigorated by plenty, is repressed by the chilling breath of want. The hateful passions that had vanished reappear. The mighty law of self-preservation expels all the softer and more exalted emotions of the soul. The temptations to evil are too strong for human nature to resist. The corn is plucked before it is ripe, or hidden away in unfair proportions, and the whole black train of vices that belong to falsehood are immediately generated. Provisions no longer flow in for the support of the mother with a large family. The children are sickly from insufficient food. The rosy flush of health gives place to the pallid cheek and hollow eye of misery. Benevolence, yet lingering in a few bosoms, makes some faint expiring struggles, till at length self-love resumes his wonted empire and lords it triumphant over the world.*²

This "black train of vices" is what we conservationists are up against. This is why we cannot make things better. This is why our well-reasoned letters to politicians, our appeals to the greater public, our appeals to the greater *good*—this is why it all fails. The human population has built up to the point at which we are behaving like rats in a crowded cage, and nothing is going to improve until our numbers are fewer.

Which they will be, one way or another. "Fewer" could very well be "zero."

The environmental movement has been slow to grasp this. Hardly any of my colleagues in the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society or the Alberta Wilderness Association head their list of must-dos with "Reduce population." They don't seem to realize that even if we were to change our ways and become thoroughly green, at current population levels the world's ecosystems will still collapse. The salient studies are many, but I need cite only one: NASA has found that we now appropriate 20 percent of the

¹ This essay first appeared in *Hope Beneath Our Feet: Restoring Our Place in the Natural World*, edited by Martin Keogh and published by North Atlantic Books in 2010.

² From *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, chapter 10.

earth's annual plant growth to supply ourselves—just one species among many millions—with food, fiber, wood and fuel.³ This cannot last.

We should also recognize that our destructive behavior is built right in. We are naturally habitat-modifiers, like beavers or elephants. We probably cannot do otherwise, dependent as we are on tools and intellect rather than on fangs and claws. Unlike the food-gathering equipment of other species, ours is technological and not self-limiting.

Nonetheless, let us assume that through education and legislation and enforcement we could reduce our individual impact significantly. Alas, in our billions we could not do so enough to allow normal survival rates for other species, on which we depend to give us breathable air, drinkable water and a climate more hospitable than that of Venus.

These arguments are academic anyway. The world's troublemakers are too busy laying waste to think about this kind of thing at all. Reasoning is for university professors, not for presidents ramping up the next war. They will never understand, and they are in charge.

Thus are we stuck. We need to de-crowd the world in order to stop perilous crowded-world behavior, but perilous crowded-world behavior is preventing us from de-crowding the world. I can't think of any way to solve this circular problem, and no one else seems to have figured it out either. The time allotted for answering the question has run out. So I'm going to be honest with you. It looks as if we have had it. The world is already experiencing an "extinction event," as my fellow geologists coldly refer to it, something like the asteroid strike that claimed about two-thirds of the species on the planet sixty-five million years ago. This time we are the asteroid. Our collision with the planet's ecosystems is going to bring us down, too, and soon. It may happen in one go, via mushroom cloud and other weaponry, or it may be more gradual, requiring a generation or two of proper Malthusian misery as everything goes haywire. Either way, the complex systems required to feed our huge population will fail, and our numbers will crash. Either way, the future looks grave indeed.

The truth may set one free, but this particular truth is pretty hard to take. It is so crushingly hopeless. So damned sad. Job number one for any organism is to maintain its own kind, yet here we have the entire human race headed over a cliff, and there is nothing a single person can do to stop it. Or even millions of people acting together. Millions more, ignorant and malevolently led, will resist ferociously. Our trip to oblivion has taken ten thousand years, through countless wars, tyrannies, insurrections, counter-revolutions, genocides, famines and plagues—a long and painful journey from one overpopulation-induced horror to the next. The edge of the precipice looms, our speed is increasing, and the brakes have been disabled by madmen.

How does one deal with that?

³ This is work by Marc Imhoff and Lahouari Bounoua. Read it at www.nasa.gov/vision/earth/environment/0624_hanpp.html. Their figures do not include the oceans. Recent research by Boris Worm, of Dalhousie University, has shown that populations of all marine species we use as food, anywhere in the world, will have collapsed—shrunk to less than 10 percent of historical numbers—by 2048 (*Science*, 3 November 2006).

I deal with it as most people do when they have to live with wrongs that can't be put right. I choose to ignore it most of the time. Otherwise I would lose my mind, à la Don Quixote, and go tilting at Walmarts.

Instead, I buy things there. Um, only as second or third choice, you understand. But there it is: the ability to look the other way and carry on. This comes so naturally to us that it must have survival value. Think of everyone at Auschwitz, prisoners and gas-chamber attendants alike, all doing their chores and counting the days until either the Holocaust was complete or the liberators arrived. At the end of the war, there were surprisingly large numbers of both parties still alive.

Knowing what I do about the impending fate of humanity, sometimes I feel like I'm trapped in some kind of upscale extermination camp. Yet I still do my job and pay my taxes, part of the mass of humanity quietly going about its business, ironic proof that we are basically good-hearted and optimistic beings. I live in faint hope that something unexpected and unifying will occur, such that we all wake up one morning knowing that together we can beat this thing.

And I keep writing about environmental issues, hoping faintly that my words might help to spark that unexpected and unifying event. Yet every time I write, it puts me in mind of the old Arab saying, "The dogs bark, but the caravan moves on."

Sigh. After blaming myself and my fellow barking dogs for failing to stop the caravan, I now know that we haven't had the slightest chance of succeeding.

However, this is strangely relieving. The problem of defeatism (giving up too easily) is no longer an issue. We have tried hard and done our best, but we are defeated, plain and simple. Being defeated simplifies things. Strategic thinking—"If we do thus-and-so, maybe we can win!"—is no longer required. More than ever, I can be directed by my conscience. I can now say and do what I believe to be right, even when it doesn't appear to advance my cause, because the cause is lost. How odd ... in a personal sense, I have won.

What I have won is a surprisingly good life. My wife and I live in the middle of a national park in the Canadian Rockies. As a self-employed professional naturalist and the author of some popular books on the mountains, I am often hired as a guide by park visitors. This is a lot of fun, especially when I'm hiking and back-packing with my clients. In the winter months I read to classes of schoolchildren from my novel about ravens. (This is even more fun. We get to make noisy bird sounds in the library.) Much of what I do for a living is enjoyable and appreciated by others. Given the conditions under which so much of humanity suffers, I am lucky. I have all three things needed to make me happy: I live in a place I love, with people I love, doing work I love to do.

Wishing to sustain this situation leads me to keep sparring with the local despoilers. Unable to really stop them, I try to slow them down as they plunder Jasper National Park, my home, for money. I keep on keeping on, and perhaps you should, too.

First reason: the world is worth it. Our species, remarkable and admirable in so many ways, is worth it. Mostly, though, Mother Nature is worth it. No matter how beleaguered she is, there is always beauty to be found in her. If I can help to preserve

little bits of the natural world, those places will provide pleasure to anyone who goes there, including me. And as the extinction event comes on more strongly, protected areas may make all the difference to the survival of species other than our own.

Second reason: an irrational but compelling sense of duty. Thus did the firefighters rush into the flaming towers of the World Trade Centre. Thus does the conservationist take on the coal companies. (I did so and lost.) Sometimes the lone good guy wins, like the person who stood in the way of those tanks on Tiananmen Square. And win or lose, good guys inevitably receive awards—sometimes posthumously—for trying.

Third reason: liberal guilt. It's not fair that my species is wiping out so many other species. It's not their fault that our private party is ruining the planet. And that grieves me. I owe it to the wolverines to give them a chance at survival.

Fourth reason: wolverines have rights. This is an argument I'm still struggling with, but if the wolverines ever get lawyers I'd rather be on their good side.

Fifth reason: encouraging people to protect the environment and have fewer children can't hurt. It's bound to be doing some good, because it's keeping the earth a little greener. The more wildland we keep intact—and Canada has the most in the world—the better the chance that at least a few human beings will survive the disaster ahead. Perhaps they will be within procreating distance of one another.

Sixth reason: there is always the possibility, remote but still there, that governments may come to their senses, get together and try to turn things around. If so, they will be looking for help. Those of us who have been engaged in enviro-related stuff for many years, whether as scientists or activists (rarely as both), have acquired some expertise. We could be useful. In the meantime we can be working on the long list of things that need to be done for planned population reduction to work. These ideas are worth promoting for their own sake, anywhere and everywhere, because they will improve our lives. We can keep pointing to that list every time a politician might be looking.⁴

Seventh reason: enjoyment of the game. Taking on the developers can be entertaining. I'm in Canada, where the people across the table are usually polite and do not attack you in the parking lot after the hearing. It's fun to go picketing every now and again, to be on television, provide sound bites for radio, etc. Builds poise and self confidence. Keeps one's protestation skills sharp. And if we don't exercise our right to protest we will lose it. (Of course, if we *do* exercise that right in substantial numbers—such that we represent a genuine threat to the established order—we will lose it, too.)

Eighth reason: the environmental movement has brought some wonderful people through my door. Some have become my friends for life.

Ninth reason: when things get really bad, we eco-buddies can help each other. All those survivalist types squirreling away canned food and guns in their basements are just going to wind up shooting each other. During the worst of times, the key to staying alive has been to surround oneself with trusted family and friends, sharing everything and

⁴ The list is too long to include here. It's on my website, www.bengadd.com. Click the "Writings" link.

looking out for one another. In really dire circumstances, cooperation works better than competition.

Tenth and best reason: trying to do what's right in this world is a basic human instinct, for most of us a more powerful drive than the temptation to do wrong. Without that built-in altruism, our species would have disappeared long ago. Economist Herman Daly and philosopher John Cobb have invented a brilliant new economics based on this finding. It's the subject of their 1989 book *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment and a Sustainable Future*. Daly and Cobb disprove the commonly held belief that ending population growth would be economically ruinous. They show just the opposite, that long-term prosperity actually depends on stabilizing our numbers and then reducing them. *For the Common Good* is an important work, right up there with *The Wealth of Nations* and *Das Kapital*. It's also a whole lot more uplifting. If you haven't read it yet, you should.

Daly and Cobb agree that lending a hand for the planet's health is its own reward. Trying to keep the land beautiful, the rivers pure, the air sweet—to them that's all just plain good. A no-brainer for anyone, really. Doing right by the earth warms the heart, whether one has much success or not.

That alone would keep me plugging away. But to maintain momentum I have needed one more thing. It's the thing a lot of us Green Party types neglect. It is this: we need to kick back and enjoy the world we are trying to save.

Yes, we need to play, and it helps if it's physical. Too many environmental activists are unfit, urban-dwelling *in*-activists. We need exercise.

We need exercise outdoors, in the natural world. My wife and I are lucky enough to be surrounded by the mountain wilderness we cherish. We can step off our porch and be on the trail in five minutes, enjoying ourselves in a place we have tried hard to protect. After yet another meeting about yet another threat to the national park, when I'm angry with the opportunists gathered at the gates and the park officials who seem much too willing to let them in, there's nothing better than a two-hour hike. It clears the mind and restores the spirit. Evil recedes in the rosy glow of a good workout in natural surroundings.

Why is that? Why is it so attractive to walk in the woods?

I think it's because the wilderness is where our species grew up. That's where we lived back in the days when the world's total population was under a million. Back then we were proud aboriginal hunters and gatherers, not wimpy wage-slaves and Safeway shoppers. We were doing what we had evolved to do, we liked doing it, and the world in which we did it was unspoiled. There were no cities or freeways or coal mines or clear-cuts or oil wells or pig farms or car factories or suburbs or strip malls or army bases or missile silos. To quote the Navaho, we “walked in beauty.” I think we miss that.

When I'm in the back-country of Jasper National Park, walking in beauty, the people I meet on the trail might be the same folks with whom I have endured an Edmonton traffic snarl. “Snarl” is right. There, we cursed the situation and each other. In the back-country, though, walking in beauty even if it's raining, we smile and say hello.

In the wilds we are few, and thus we are nice to each other. It comes naturally and it feels good. The feeling lingers after the trip is over. Great days in the mountains lead to better days back home.

Thus, recreation is an essential part of my life. To make sure I get enough, I have a rule of thirds:

- I spend about a third of my time making a living. I have to do that.
- I spend another third of my time doing things that I'm not paid for but do anyway, because people I love and care about need the help. This includes everything from household chores to volunteering on worthwhile projects to resisting serious corporate and government misconduct when the need arises. For the sake of my children and grandchildren, I'd better do that.
- I spend the remaining third of my time brightening my life, often through physical activity outdoors. I climb the peaks and ride my bike, hike with family and friends, go cross-country skiing and so on. I can allow myself that.

Observing this rule has counterbalanced the doomsday negatives in my life with positives. It has helped to ward off the gray waves of despair when they have swept in. If I have learned what is wrong with the world, I am grateful also to have learned what is right. I can live with that.

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