

Earth Diet, Earth Culture

How Much of the Planet's Life Does Your Cadillac Cost?

William H. Koethke

1987

Fifth Estate Note: In “Earth Culture-Earth Diet” author William H. Koethke chronicles the life and culture of the inhabitants along New Mexico’s San Francisco River watershed over a millennium up to the present time. At the time he wrote the article William lived in the area described, but has since become a member of the consensus community of Breitenbush Hot Springs in Detroit, Oregon. He recently was arrested for blockading logging crews trying to cut the last remnant of undamaged old growth forest near his community.

The energy an organism feeds upon defines it within the cosmic web of energy flows.

What each species feeds upon within the life of the earth describes the parameters of its behavior and physical identity. The wolf, for example, is physically structured so that it can catch and eat deer. Its social life is structured so that it can hunt in packs, therefore enabling the wolf to catch deer that it could not catch individually.

What one puts in one’s mouth is a fundamental spiritual, cultural and political act. The nature of the energy one feeds upon either puts one in balance with the cosmos or it puts one in disharmony with the cosmos—an organic state of disease.

In the recent past of our two million year family history, some have abandoned the natural culture of the human family and a disease has broken out in the form of empires. The patriarchal empire is a fundamental ecological imbalance, a fundamental sexual imbalance, a fundamental population imbalance and a fundamental mental imbalance (wherein a living organism confuses its identity with its accumulation of dead material objects).

The basic nature of this planetary disease is a cyclic swelling and collapse of populations who make increasing material demands upon the declining planetary fertility. The legacy of Empire can be traced through China (the great forests and soils gone), Indus Valley (entire semi-arid ecosystem gone), Tigris-Euphrates (forests, soils gone and one-third of the arable land salinized), Mediterranean (soils, forest gone and North Africa, a rock pile), Europe (natural forest ecosystem gone, acid rain preparing a final coup-de-grace)—and now, the whole planet through the agency of the world-wide industrial empire.

When a disease agent invades an organism the organism will attack and eradicate it, or the disease agent will kill the host and then die itself, or, there will be some kind of remission. In China we see a late stage of the disease that has achieved some remission at a very low level. The forces of the planet-cosmos have guided the Chinese social body into a highly simplified, artificial and probably temporary balance wherein they live on their own excrement. The culture of empire was finally forced to observe one natural energy cycle. When there was nothing left alive, the people began creating soil from their own feces. Historians agree that the Chinese could not have survived without the use of “nightsoil.”

So, what we choose to put in our mouth enhances the life of the planet, balances with it or runs a net deficit. It takes the planetary life between 300 and 1,000 years to build each inch of topsoil and “civilization” has been running a net deficit since it began. Once balance was lost, the warrior cult of empire began dipping into the fund

of planetary fertility. Since then, its explosive boom and bust cycles have been financed from the death of the living things of the planet.

Within the industrial Empire, the mediums of communication frame the beginning of the end of the last cycle as “acts of God.” In the most ecologically devastated areas of the planet, where there is no ecological margin left: Ethiopia, East Africa, Central America, etc., there are masses of people and few living things—topsoil—and any perturbation becomes a crisis that is called a drought, flood, famine or other “acts of God.”

As the ecological devastation frames the picture of numerically exploding “societies in crisis”—the great question of the next century arises, “How can we live without killing the Earth, and ultimately ourselves as well?”

On the watershed of the San Francisco River we know of six distinct cultural forms that have occupied the area and each has addressed the question in a different way. Each cultural form was integrated with or isolated from the life of the earth by diet. These cultures were the Pleistocene—Pit-House People the Kiva People (Anasazi-Mimbres-Mogollon-Pueblo); the Apache foragers; the Spanish village—planter-herders; the Texas cow herders and the present cow, timber, industrial axis.

The Human-Planet Metabolism

The Pit-House People lived thoroughly within the cyclic metabolism of the San Francisco Watershed. There are two moisture cycles on the watershed. One of the “rainy seasons” begins around the first part of July with the incoming thunderstorms that come with air currents off the Gulf of Mexico—these last until Fall. In late Fall and Winter, weather comes from the Southwest, from the direction of the southern tip of Baja California. These winds bring winter storms and moisture. From March until July a mini-drought or dry season occurs. Each of the two seasonal rain periods have their own characteristic species of grasses and forbs known as “cool season” and “warm season” plants. As the summer plants seed out and have become brown, the cool season plants germinate and begin some growth. They lie dormant over December and January and then grow again to seed out in May and June.

The animals have their own cycles of migration and reproduction as well as the birds. Many of these cycles climax in the fall in the Chaparral country, that life zone where the pinon-juniper forest meets the ponderosa pine forest at 6,000 feet elevation to 7,500 feet. This area, the Chaparral, features an abundant mixture of oak and manzanita also. In the Fall many things ripen; the pinon nuts, yucca, bananas, grapes, acorns, berries, grass seeds and many others. At this time the animals migrate to the Chaparral to get fat before the winter. Skunks, raccoons, squirrels, deer, bear, elk, peccary, turkey, mountain sheep and others are followed into the Chaparral by the coyote, cougar, ringtails and bobcat.

It is in this Chaparral region that one finds most of the shallow depressions and other artifacts of the ancient Pit-House People. No doubt they foraged widely, but they were in the Chaparral each fall for the big harvest.

The metabolism of the planet was their metabolism. In wet cycles more deer ate more acorns and the deer fat kept the Pit-House People fueled against the cold-damp. We have no record of these peoples’ human culture but anthropologists studying tribal foragers calculate that they had exceptional health and each person averaged 500 hours “work” annually to sustain themselves; plenty of time to sing and dance—and tell coyote stories.

The Mayan Adaptation

The Pit-House People were in the area in the dim past and until 100 to 500 A.D. We don’t know if the Pit-House clan were the grandmothers and grandfathers of the Kiva People (Anasazi era, 500 A.D. to Pueblo present) but chances are good that they were. There was, though, one essential difference—the Mayan Adaptation; that is, Mother Corn and her Sisters—beans, squash and chiles.

The Mayan Adaptation brought in a new metabolism with the Kiva People. The Kiva People shared the Feathered Serpent cosmology with the Maya-Aztec and were in a sense the suburbs of Copan, Uxmal and Teotihuacan.

Corn needs reasonably flat land, while squash and chiles especially, need periodic watering, so the Kiva People put up their stone house villages near the live water streams in valley bottoms. This is the riparian habitat. It is the

other area on the Watershed of explosive fertility that resonates with the Chaparral. Beaver dams, great meadows, willow thickets, cattails, black walnut, grapes, berries, arrow-leaf potatoes, birds, animals and more abounded.

From their agriculture-forager-hunter metabolism these people of the Mimbres pottery designs created a rich, complex and beautiful human culture, the equal of any on the planet. Not only did they participate in the planetary metabolism by eating from what was offered by the earth, but their very culture was a dramatic expression of that life.

Whether it is a mid-Winter ceremony to divine the fate of the bean seed for next season, the kinship communicated with the deer in the Deer Dance Ceremony, the Green Corn Dance, the Snake Dance or any of the other ceremonies too numerous to mention—they are the life of the earth in human dramatization, as the present Kiva People, the Pueblos, demonstrate.

But—there are questions. Anthropologists who study agriculture-forager-hunter people world-wide say individuals of those cultures each average 1,000 hours “work” per year and that their health is not as good as the forager-hunter and many die sooner.

On this watershed, there was a tremendous concentration of Kiva People, in excess of thirty thousand. Questions exist from archeology. Did they deforest the area for firewood and building materials? Did they denude the area of wildlife? Did they bring the life of the land to the edge so that when the dry cycle came on there was no margin left? Did they too precipitate “acts of God?” The present Pueblos have not. But why did the Anasazi disappear so mysteriously during one era? We don’t know and if any grandparents in the Pueblos do know, they are not telling. What we do know is that the Athebascans (Navajo-Apache) filled the vacuum.

The Roving Harvesters

The invading masses from 16th Century Europe found a people on this watershed that they called Apache. According to ethnobiologists Morris E. Opler and Edward F. Castetter, about 50% of the Apache diet was meat and the other half made up of non-meat sources—true forager-hunters.

These two scholars say that the people “moved with the seasonal change of weather, and followed the wild food harvests as they occurred...When colder weather came he (sic) removed to a lower altitude; in Summer he (sic) was in the highlands again. When the mesquite and screw-bean ripened or a certain animal’s fur or flesh was at its best at a particular time, the Apache was present to share in the harvest.”

The San Francisco Watershed was the home of the northern clan of the Chokonon (Chiricuahua) tribe. In the last days, Chihuahua was Elder of the northern clan and Cochise was Elder of the clan centered around the Chiricuahua and Dagon Mountains to the South.

On the West of the Northern Chokonon, were the White Mountain bands and to the East, on the headwaters of the Gila River, were the Bedonkohe of which Geronimo was a member.

Kaywaykla (who was one of the handful out of all the local bands to survive the genocide of the Empire) was from the Chihinne band, of which Victorio was a leader in the last days. The Chihinnes were centered Northwest of the Watershed near Ojo Caliente. Kaywaykla says that sometimes they migrated in Winter to the bottom of the Barranca del Cobre, the deep canyon system leading West off the Sierra Madre Occidental in Mexico. There, they could watch Sea Lions play in the river and eat tropical fruit off the trees in the canyon bottoms.

He says (by translation): “My people spent their Summers in the mountains of New Mexico, carefree, untrammelled. They migrated to Mexico in the Fall, living off the land as they went, killing game, harvesting fruit, and giving thanks to Ussen for the good things He had given. They knew the land of jungles and of tropical fruit. They knew the people whose land they crossed. They were on the very best of terms with Cochise and his band. They penetrated the fastness of Juh, Chief of the Nednhi, and were received as brothers. When they in turn came to us we gave freely of our best.”

The Chokonon were foragers and hunters, but could be keen planters when the occasion arose. At their camps, if the area was appropriate, they scattered seed which would help feed them next cycle. Of all the groups of omnivore humans, the Chokonon reached toward the maximum of nutrition of the Watershed. Whether lambsquarters

(more calcium per volume than cow's milk) or cattail roots (ground to flower it equals rice or corn nutritionally) or any of the other dozens of food sources, their nutrition was superior.

Diet is Politics

The Chokonen were democrats. They practiced as pure a form of democracy as is known. All leaders served by popular assent and, in addition, decisions were made by consensus, that is, all must agree to a decision, not just a simple majority. The diet was the basis, and the knowledge transmitted through human culture, its empowerment.

As Mark Twain said, "Tell me where you get your corn pone and I'll tell you what your opinions are." In Chokonen society, no one controlled another's food supply. With the profound knowledge of the natural world transmitted by culture, each Chokonen could secure their food independently.

This contrasts with the cultural forms of the Kiva People. The diet of the Mayan Adaptation requires villages because crops must be worked and land apportioned. Food, land, and social power created a mixture that resulted in a social hierarchy where power is (as in the Pueblos today) based upon merit, birth, membership in tribal organizations and age.

The Pit-House People, being small groups, no doubt functioned along the lines of the Chokonen with emphasis on family politics, age, experience and wisdom.

The agriculturalist Kiva People who lived in pueblos show an increasing centralization of power compared to the forager. In the same manner, the rice diet of Asia shows the tendency. To grow rice in a populated country there must be a centralized power to administer the irrigation systems, as anyone who has irrigated off a community ditch readily understands. This centralist tendency must have existed also in the irrigated empires of the Indus Valley and the Tigris-Euphrates Valley of Sumeria.

In the present diet-ecology-social form on the San Francisco Watershed, food is almost entirely shipped in by diesel truck. Now, people work 2,000 hours annually and need constant medical attention. This diet is refined and produced by mass industrial production.

The raw food material for the diet comes from industrial agriculture on a mass scale. Mass production requires the organization and control of a large mass of tractable people by huge social institutions over which the mass of people have little or no control. It is freedom and an organic life traded for Cool Whip.

What one eats empowers whatever or whoever produces it. Ham and eggs for breakfast requires domesticated animals which require fences and the European farm system, which requires hierarchs to administer the many plots with many farmers—as in monarchical Europe. Now, with technology shaping society, diet is even more simplified than the Swiss farm.

There are ten basic food plants, plus cattle, swine, sheep and fowl, feeding civilization. No longer can we forage over the hills for the widely varied diet our physiology demands. We get the simplified food that is easily adapted to mass machine harvesting. Further, our conditioned taste in food changes according to the changes in the technical processes of machinery used to produce it.

Few children would eat "old-fashioned" hand churned ice cream when the industrially produced skimmed milk or hydrogenated vegetable oil with a chemical ester flavor developed from coal tar is available. (The new "ice cream" has the proper "mouth feel.") With the machine process, civilized people are conditioned to food that is the most technically efficient to refine.

What one eats determines one's ethical relationship to the cosmos and shapes and determines power relationships within each culture.

The Coming of the New Order of Reality

The Pit-House People, the Kiva People and the Chokonen saw the Earth as a secure home, and they felt and practiced a kinship with the life around them. The Chokonen, finally, were confronted by strange invaders who were qualitatively different than any native culture they had been exposed to. The invaders lived in the strange

mental world of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition where life was bad (a veil of tears and suffering), and death was the portal to good (Heaven). Matter, the planet, living things and one's body were of the Satanic realm, while pain, suffering and death for the Holy Cause were good—and would be rewarded in Heaven. Curiously, at the same time, these people were exploding out of Europe in a colonial expansion, bent upon stealing any gold, goods, land or resources anyone else in the world might have.

The Spanish immigrants on the Watershed were few in number because the Athebascan tribes had not yet been exterminated. The invaders set up a village agricultural-herder dietary regime. They settled on the most fertile areas, the riparian habitats in the valley bottoms. The Spanish diet was basically the Mayan Adaptation diet borrowed from the Mexican Indians but they also exploited the fertility of the Earth for surpluses, to trade for a few industrial products. They nonetheless were close to a food self-sufficient cultural style. Social power in their communities was based on private property, age and social status.

The Spanish began the desertification of the Watershed by overgrazing with cattle, sheep and goats. They accomplished much of the destruction of the riparian habitat by grazing it out, clearing and burning. They also greatly altered the hydrology of the entire area by beginning to kill the beavers because they interfered with irrigation systems.

In the time of the Chokonon, there were beavers from the tops of the mountains of the Mogollon Rim, down the San Francisco and Gila Rivers, all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. Now, there is only one strong colony on the San Francisco drainage and a few weak remnant groups. Along with the beavers, riparian habitat (with minor exceptions) has been destroyed from here to Yuma, Arizona.

In the 1880s, the Texas cow herder group invaded with vast herds of cattle. Hungry for profits and free range grazing, they dealt the grass cover a blow from which it has never recovered. They translated the biomass of grass into a diet of industrially refined sugar, white flour, lard, beans, beef, and canned tomatoes and peaches purchased with the profits from cattle ranching.

If the price of beef went down, they reacted by expanding the herds and increasing the grazing pressure. They attacked the most vulnerable point of the ecosystem: the grass cover over the soil. As the grass went, the topsoil followed. Next came the arroyo cutting and the meandering rivers began to flood, tearing out the meadows, tremendously widening the river courses and filling them with gravel, in a re-enactment of the 10,000 year old story of "civilization."

Finally, the modern regime of the colonial-industrial economy took hold. Now, the process of desertification on the Watershed is so advanced that when the San Francisco River floods, the Federal government will no longer provide disaster aid because what seems like a disaster has occurred so frequently in recent years it has become a normality.

Now, the people of the Watershed are fed by the industrial metabolism. The diet is shipped in from the metropolitan centers of industry. The diet is bled from the life of the land. Topsoil, the reservoir of fertility of the land, maintains itself in a dynamic cycle by feeding upon the organic matter that falls upon it. This continuous cycle is the gauge of the health of the planet. The present logging system bleeds the Earth of what is topsoil in potential. The "raw resources" (biomass) are traded with the industries in the center of colonial power for industrial products and for the food that makes up the present diet.

Many cycles and ecological systems on the Watershed are now reeling—the hydrological cycles, the fire cycles, the weather cycles, the vegetational cycles, and the animal abundance and inter-mix cycles to mention a few.

Ham and eggs for breakfast and the European farm system have ecologically destroyed Europe. The transnational food company propagandists have caused the Japanese (and other societies) to choose the white bread of empire, thus empowering U.S. agribusiness and the trans-nationals—and cashiering the small Japanese rice farmer. Throughout the world-wide industrial empire, the mutant relationship with the Earth expands as the planet dies.

Will a cultural and spiritual balance and personal empowerment flow from dietary choices for us? They will if we stop empowering the white sugar-flour crowd by our choices. An average Chokonon could run fifty miles a day and up toward a hundred if need be; they didn't eat white bread and baloney!

Get together. Speak for the plants and animals that feed you and for all the other living beings. Inform others about the Earth diet on your watershed, its nutritional superiority and its ecological fragility.

Learn the food plants on your watershed and in your bioregion. Create culture by telling your friends about them. Observe the principles by which they thrive. Gather their seed. Help them spread. Help increase the fertility.

fifth Estate

William H. Koethke
Earth Diet, Earth Culture
How Much of the Planet's Life Does Your Cadillac Cost?
1987

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/325-spring-1987/earth-diet-earth-culture>
Fifth Estate #325, Spring, 1987

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net