

A Humble Call to Subvert the Human Empire

David Watson

“A Humble Call to Subvert the Human Empire” by longtime Fifth Estate collaborator David Watson is from a recent collection of his writing, *Against the Megamachine: Essays on empire & its enemies* (Autonomedia, 1999); it’s one of a few in this highly recommended volume that has not previously appeared in this newspaper. See Bookstore page for ordering information.

I’ve been thinking about how an optimistic, problem-solving attitude can conceal a deeper hopelessness ever since I ran across the following news item: In 1995 India’s Environment Ministry moved to protect Indian butterfly and moth species under the government’s Wildlife Act to prevent smuggling of the insects.

The measure came after two German tourists were caught trying to leave the country with 15,000 preserved butterflies and moths in their luggage.

Should we feel relief at attempts to plug one of the myriad leaks in nature’s troubled reservoir, that some are grappling with a grave issue most of us did not even suspect existed? Or numb grief, knowing the guardians cannot block every gate, nor stanch every hemorrhaging wound? “Man the exterminator has designs on everything that lives,” the misanthropic philosopher E.M. Cioran once quipped. “Soon we will be hearing about the last louse.”

Those two smugglers exemplify a short-term, narrow self-interest driving both individuals and international institutions toward the abyss. But they were only the ones who happened to be intercepted, and thus a guarantee there are more—fifty, perhaps a hundred more. In a world where human beings are the measure of all things and sole repository of value, where every unique manifestation of life has become merchandise, rare butterflies will have little chance of living out their own evolutionary destiny.

Sadly, collectors are also only one factor, probably a lesser one, in the demise of butterflies, greatly overshadowed by macrocosmic insults like dam construction, logging, agriculture and the use of biocides, urban and industrial development, and other disruptions of butterfly habitat. And as a single moth goes, so may a flower, and with the moth and flower, other members of a small and complex community of life utterly indivisible, and invisible to us.

Sliding Toward the Chute

Those moths and butterflies that do eventually succumb will join an accelerating danse macabre of extinction brought about by a single clever species during the last few centuries, and most acutely in the last few decades. Some victims are already gone: great auk, passenger pigeon, woodland bison, Eskimo Curlew, Dodo (and with it a plant dependent for its germination on the passage of its seed through the Dodo’s digestive tract). Others are sliding irrevocably toward the chute: rhinoceros, elephant, tiger, piping plover, and other creatures that are vanishing before we even know of them. Like the auk, so utterly extinguished by the mid-1800s that some thought it apocryphal, these beings may one day be considered fabulous not only figuratively but in the precise sense of the unicorn, because there will be little difference in the minds of our grandchildren whether they once lived or were inventions.

It's easy to find scientists and lay people who consider this sense of loss mere sentimentality unworthy of our status as "the lords and possessors of nature," to repeat Descartes' unhappy phrase. After all, extinction is natural and inevitable, they are quick to remind us. According to this argument, trying to save species that have lost the competition between the "fit" and "unfit" is an attempt to turn back an inexorable clock; there is little room for such beautiful losers in the ongoing march of human progress.

Extinction is indeed as natural as the death of an individual. But in the present case countless species are not simply disappearing randomly; whether the process is entirely premeditated or not, human beings and institutions are actively making choices which bring about their demise. The Worldwatch Institute reports that three fourths of the world's bird species are declining in population or threatened with extinction. One in four mammals is threatened. Virtually all species of wild cats and most bears are declining seriously, and more than two thirds of the world's 150 primate species are threatened.

Peter Raven, Director of the Missouri Botanical Garden and a conservation biologist of international reputation, estimates that as ecosystems are converted to agricultural and pastoral purposes in the next twenty to thirty years, the rate of extinction of plant and animal land species will go from several per day to *several hundred per day*. Nearly all contemporary extinctions are due directly or indirectly to human activities—development, deforestation, contamination, hunting and the introduction of aggressive exotic species into new habitats.

Rising human population is widely considered to be the single underlying cause of the contemporary die-off along the bulldozer's blade and chainsaw's teeth. Ecological meltdown is typically represented by a landless peasant slashing the forest with his machete, or a tribal woman carrying a bundle of sticks on her head and a hungry child on her back.

To be sure, the well-known ascending J-curve of rising human numbers, accompanying the vertiginous obliteration of innumerable other species, leaves a stunning impression. At present growth rates, world population is estimated to reach 8.9 billion by the year 2030, and level off at 11.5 billion around 2150—an unprecedented rise in human numbers of more than ten times in two hundred years. Yet sheer numbers do not explain the current mass extinction spasm; population growth is one increasingly aggravating factor in a constellation of causes. We need to look beyond the numbers at social structures, an energy- and commodity-intensive development model, and the social and historical causes of extreme poverty.

For example, while they comprise only 25 percent of the world's population, advanced industrial nations account for 75 percent of energy use and consume 85 percent of all forest products. U.S. per capita energy consumption is some 250 times greater than that of many poor countries, suggesting that daily life in the North contributes far more to ecological destruction than population growth in the South (though growing middle classes in the South are having a similar impact there). On a global scale, according to one U.S. official, the impact of the world's poorest people is "probably more akin to picking up branches and twigs after commercial chain saws have done their work."

The biological notion of carrying capacity—essentially the maximum number of a species that a habitat can indefinitely support—is complicated enough for there to be wide divergence of opinion whether or not the planet can adequately support such human numbers (though there are copious signs that our ability to feed ourselves is declining due to abuse and overexploitation of our food sources).

There is adequate evidence that people are not presently starving because our numbers have surpassed carrying capacity. But even if some believe we can provide a decent life to two or three times the number of people now living, no thoughtful person could possibly doubt the disastrous effect such numbers will inevitably have on other species, other than those which easily adapt or which we find useful to us. Calculating our maximum load is terribly misguided if we feel any sense of responsibility for those other beings most certainly being obliterated as we struggle to keep up.

Crowded Into the Urbanopolis

Even thinking only of our own offspring and not those of other beings, how many people the earth can support is still the wrong question; we also need to consider what kind of life we want to lead—crowded into the urbanopolis, the landscape entirely marshaled to meet our ever-expanding needs, or in community with other species in a green

world something like the one in which we evolved. The latter planet will make it possible for all species—and thus, wilderness and diverse land and ocean habitats—to flourish. That will be the best world for us, too, but common sense makes clear that it will necessitate fewer of us.

There is a “nature-bred-in-tooth-and-claw” idea that human depredation and consequent mass extinction are entirely natural. According to this view, even Paleolithic humans, being an intrinsically murderous lot, carried out their share of mass extinctions (for example, supposedly wiping out many large mammals in North America). Yet there is little hard evidence, and much reason to doubt—except in the most obvious cases of extinction on islands like that of the flightless Moa of New Zealand/Aotearoa, for example—that mass extinctions were caused by prehistoric foragers and hunters.

Farley Mowat, in his book *Sea of Slaughter*, provides a dizzying description of the carnage perpetrated on the animals of the North American eastern seaboard by Euro-American explorers and entrepreneurs. He notes that the great auk coexisted with human hunters for millennia before succumbing in a couple of hundred years to the mechanized market-driven empire that was only the quaint precursor to ours.

Ultimately, we can remain agnostic about whether or not our distant ancestors foolishly fouled their nest. It is pretty much irrelevant to the reality we face now: an immensely brutal, and thoroughly anthropocentric civilization is presently ravaging the earth, ostensibly in our human interest. The scale and scope of the devastation is unprecedented in the history of our species. This civilization’s arrogance is evident in our scientific tradition’s urge to expand what Francis Bacon called “the empire of man.” It has more archaic sources, too. The Judeo-Christian biblical edict granted us “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” Now many animals mentioned in the Bible are going the way of the Dodo—Jonah’s whale, the Persian Wild Ass on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the Nubian Ibex, the Arabian oryx which Isaiah tells us was trapped in nets, and others. Human dominion has done these creatures little good; most have fallen forever into our nets.

The image of a human imperium oppressing the rest of nature is metaphor, but not merely so; it conforms to an actual pattern of imperial conquest, plunder, eventual exhaustion and collapse. Our century has given a privileged layer of humanity an industrially organized life more opulent, more wasteful (yet still more frenetic, alienated and oppressive) than that of any ancient hierarch.

We’ve transformed the earth into a giant mine and waste pit, its forests and meadow lands into enormous feed lots for billions of stock animals, its waters into cesspools devoid of life, its skies into orbiting junkyards of contaminated rocket debris. The world’s tallest mountains are littered with expedition trash, and ships at sea do not go a single day without seeing plastic garbage. Giant nets thirty miles long drag the oceans, killing millions of sea creatures, including birds and mammals, many of them simply thrown overboard.

The whole planet has become a war zone for every other thing that creepeth upon the earth, generating a biocrisis not just for individual species, but for whole webs of life. Human beings are now altering the basic physiology of the planet. Industrial smog can be found everywhere over the oceans, and weather patterns have been so dramatically affected that climatologists now discuss the phenomenon of “climate death.”

Reconfigure Life

Industrial contamination is pervasive, even in the fat cells of Antarctic penguins, and the rain is not only acid but toxic. Whether industrialism warms or cools the atmosphere, its unprecedented chemical experiment threatens to reconfigure life in ways barely imaginable, but undoubtedly for the worse.

All empires turn out to be relatively short-lived enterprises that finally betray their own subjects. Despite their enormous cost to the rest of life, modern civilization’s demands on the planet have engendered a mode of life that fails to meet even the barest essentials of one fifth of humanity, or to satisfy fundamental psychic needs of the rest.

However many preserved exotic butterflies the privileged may be able to purchase for a time, progressive “humanization” of the planet dehumanizes the very people it purports to serve. And we too have fallen into the nets, as our genes are mapped, and some deemed useless “junk DNA,” like the animals discarded from fishing vessels as economically worthless. The earliest stages of tampering are underway, as the empire prepares to be fully internalized.

Strangely, our very anthropocentrism may be our own undoing, with our relentless religion of economic-technical instrumentalism proving useless to prevent it.

“Empire of Man”

Pragmatic self-interest alone should teach us that we must change before nature exacts inevitable revenge. And nothing can be done, North or South, without social strategies that create institutions to provide practical alternatives, and thus opportunities for people to change. Yet meaningful subversion of the “empire of man” requires more than enlightened self-interest or even social justice.

It means real transformation—a cultural practice neither anthropocentric nor simply “ecocentric,” but perhaps polycentric. It requires a way of living that considers all life a larger community deserving of our solidarity.

In the process, people may discover that limiting our numbers and consumption—living more simply so that others (human and non-human) may simply live—brings ineluctable rewards of its own. Such a recognition suggests precisely that spiritual dimension missing so dramatically from modern life and its frenzy of accumulation.

Who—and What—Will We Be?

For the last few years I have practiced T'ai Chi, an ancient, meditative martial art that names many of its postures for animals such as monkeys, cranes and tigers. I have often wondered what would become of a practice inextricably woven to such creatures when human hubris finally extinguishes them. What will become of our own spirit when inspirited creatures we invoke are gone from our midst? Who—and what—will we be? When we realize the life-forms and life webs we've slaughtered and abused are our own larger self, as many native peoples, radical ecologists and other “counter-traditions” remind us, we will have begun the necessary process of renewal that could make life worth living in the coming centuries.

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