

# Man First ? Man Last ?

## The Paradox of Human Ecology

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The ubiquitous conservation speeches and environmental panels of today are dealing mainly with urgent problems of population, pollution, and crowding. That the priorities are given to these big-city, strictly human, homocentric syndromes is obvious- and understandable. People die of pollution, people go crazy with crowding, people starve and lay waste the lands through overpopulation.

Hopefully, we may yet solve the *pollution crisis*; we can, I think, clean up our polluted nests. But if, in cleaning up the cities, we forsake the rest of life, if we, in our human preoccupation, let all but corn and cow slide into the abysmal finality of irreversible extinction, our species indeed will have committed ecological suicide.

However, there is no cause for optimism in the broader *environmental crisis*, for the specters of ecosystem collapse, of catastrophic extinctions of most living animal species and of a vast number of plant species, are now on the horizon.

According to Talbot (Bioscience, 15 March 1970), 3% of the world's mammals became extinct in historic times, not counting such prehistoric wonders as the Irish Elk or the Mammoth, and most of them during the past 50 years ! Today, 10% to 12% can be considered endangered, extrapolating from the conservative 8% of species and subspecies listed as periled in the Red Data Book for Mammals of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, and perhaps 130 of the 400 United States mammal taxa are believed to be threatened with extinction. Birds are fairing no better! S. Dillon Ripley of the Smithsonian Institution recently estimated that a majority of animal species will be extinct by the year 2000! And Kenneth Boulding suggests that, with the present rate of human reproduction, in another generation it may be economically impossible to maintain any animals, except domesticated ones, outside of zoos.

Butterfly and wild flower, mountain lion and caribou, blue whale and pelican,

coral reef and prairie land- who shall speak for you ? My grandchild may need to know you, to see and smell you, to hear and feel you, to be alive- bright and happy!

Yet among all the many programs of the recent "Teach-ins" at the University of Michigan and at Northwestern University and 1000 other campuses, few spoke for the wild environment, for nature, for a *Morpho* butterfly in a Peruvian valley, for a timber wolf chasing caribou in Alaska.

This lack of concern is understandable, because man now occupies every bit of the earth and like a dictator, controls, or thinks he could control, if he wished, every living thing. As some see it, except for a few primitive tribes, "Man has . . . broken contact almost entirely with the ecological universe that existed before his culture developed. He no longer occupies ecological niches; he makes them. " \*

But have our genes ceased to need the environment that shaped them? If we destroy ecosystems and species with abandon- ecosystems to which we are adapted, species whose values we do not yet know, and cannot predict- we surely do it at our own peril.

Thus, the lack of focus on the natural environment, on the wild animals and plants, on the woods and streams, is frightening.

Who defends wilderness, the natural, unspoiled environment? Who defends the environment in which we evolved, and which we still need in all its purity? Who, except for a vociferous but ineffective minority?

The ultimate question one has to ask is this: Shall man come first, always first, at the expense of other life? And is this really first? In the short run, this may be expedient; in the long run, impossible.

Not until man places man second, or, to be more precise, not until man accepts his dependency on nature and puts himself in place as part of it, not until then does man put man first! *This is the great paradox of human ecology*. Not until

man sees the light and submits gracefully and moderates the homocentric part of himself; not until man accepts the primacy of the beauty, the diversity, and integrity of nature and limits his domination and his numbers, placing equally great value on the preservation of the environment and on his own life, is there hope that man will survive.

If we are to usher in an Age of Ecologic Reason, we must accept the certainty of a radical economic and political restructuring as well as ethical and cultural restructuring of society.

No more expanding populations. No new unnecessary dams. No new destructive subdivisions. We must stop and limit ourselves now.

Let the archaic power structures of the technologically intoxicated cultures of the USA, USSR, Japan, and others, listen and listen well to the winds of change:

The earth and the web of life come first,  
man comes second;  
profits and "progress" come last.

Man now is responsible for every wolf, as well as for every child, for prairie and ocean as well as for every field,

Henceforth the laws to govern man must be laws of ecology, not the laws of a self-destructive laissez-faire economics. And what the laws of ecology say is that we, we fancy apes, are forever related to, forever responsible for this clean air, for this green, flower-decked, and fragile earth.

Indeed, what ecology teaches us, what it implores us to learn, is that all things, living and dead, including man, are interrelated within the web of life. This must be the foundation of our new ethics.

If you love your children, if you wish them to be happy, love your earth with tender care and pass it on to them diverse and beautiful, so that they, 10,000 years hence, may live in a universe still diverse and beautiful, and find joy and wonder in being alive.