

## YES WE CAN ADAPT TO A CHANGING EARTH

“It may seem that there is no world left but that brand new one into which we have been thrust with walking wounds, nerves jangling, suffering an outrageous exile from the past. It has even given us a new and more terrible dread than we have ever had before; that the human experiment, self-alienated, self-concentrated, has turned itself into a new kind of unknown, without recourse as well as without precedent.” John Hay, *In Defense of Nature*, © 1969

The dread John May had in mind has multiplied in secret, albeit not much of a secret, now has been overshadowed by the latest dread, global warming. That too has been with us for thirty or more years but until recently kept in the background as one of the many scientific observations that may have been interesting to scientists but did not touch us. If there are still people who don't “believe” in global warming, they will have to believe in climate change, a current manifestation of global warming. Climate change is here.

We know — and that too is a fact, not a belief — that the way we, humankind, choose to live, using enormous amounts of energy that we get from burning coal and oil, is the cause of global warming, climate change.

Of course it is difficult to change one's way of life. People in the rich countries have grown up in and with this way of life. This is the only life style they know. We cannot imagine living without a refrigerator, food wrapped in plastic (factory made), living and working 37 stories up from the ground, cars, movies, TV, cell phones (mobile phones), the internet. If we respond at all to changes that scientists say will result from climate change it is to consider alternative ways to produce the energy our life style requires. The thought that we may have to change the way we live has not quite made it into today. We might think alternative ways to create the same amount of electricity we need. But needing less?

Our children can think of that.

Malaysia and Indonesia, two countries that together own the island of Borneo, have virtually destroyed the rain forest on that island to grow nothing but oil palms to provide palm oil they expect to be the alternative “bio fuel” for tomorrow's cars, trains, and all factories that produce the electricity to run our various versions of western civilization. The wholesale destruction of half of all the rain forests of our planet is one factor that caused and continues to cause climate

change. Whether a large island covered in oil palms absorbs as much CO<sub>2</sub> as the same island covered in a rain forest remains to be seen, But it is not difficult to foresee that mono-culture on such a scale will destroy the earth of Borneo when the oil palms die, as all plants do eventually. Modern man invented mono-culture, and learned after the first year that mono-culture requires massive doses of chemicals (pesticides) and impoverishes the soil which then must be given new life with other chemicals (fertilizers). The chemicals are made from oil (petroleum).

Our profligate way of life has been possible only because we are a very small percentage of the world's population. The great majority of humankind lives in dire poverty, often starving. My guess is less than one billion of the planet's human population of very close to seven billion live as middle class Americans (used to) live. Such a life style is not sustainable, was not sustainable before we knew about climate change; dangerous now that we know about climate change.

Ban Ki-moon, secretary-general of the United Nations, made a statement today that he does not expect a binding agreement at the meeting in Copenhagen a month from now. The planet's atmosphere is global of course, we think our economies global but the people of this globe are divided in a thousand groups and political parties, each with their own idea of what they are willing to sacrifice to sustain a way of life that is far from global. That suggests we ought to prepare ourselves to adapt to a changing planet. Some areas will become warmer, others colder, or wetter, or dryer.

John Hay deplores our irrevocable exile from the past but, more deplorable, we have eradicated our roots, the indigenous cultures of the planet, the people who lived in sustainable cultures for thousands of years. We could and should have learned from them, But for the past several hundred years we have systematically destroyed indigenous people and their cultures. First missionaries, then soldiers, then governments, and now the corporations that are stealing their trees, their oil, and whatever resources they decide are more important than learning to live sustainably. Our civilization is for today and maybe to the end of this quarter, but absolutely no concern for consequences.

We're on our own. We must relearn how to live sustainably on an earth we know very little about, and even less how it will change in the next years. That means we must learn to think differently. No longer think "more," as we are taught to think today, but think how to make a meaningful life with less.

Today we still have a choice; we can choose to learn living with less.

Unfortunately we must learn without the wisdom, the experience of ancient people. Without ancestors to teach us we must, as our ancestors did, learn from nature. Humankind has always been but one of many forms of the natural world to which we belong. That is where we learn what we need to know to survive.

There is one planetary ecology with millions of local ecologies that we, humans, must fit in again. Nature is local; we must adapt locally. In snow and ice we learned to make shelter from snow, in deserts we learned to find water and build minimal shelters to give shade. Sustainable here does not work there. Water will be critical, fuel is already critical. There cannot be one way to adapt to a changing earth, there will be as many ways as there are (changed) landscapes.

"All landscape contains the potential world. I have been by possession dispossessed. Possession has thrown place behind, knocked out the ghosts and woodland dreams and their wild enthusiasms and the close war and peace that men have had with local nature. The air is now hazy with impurities, some of the tidewaters lapping in between the grasses take litter or industrial waste with them. The spoiling city is just around the bend. A jet bomber has left a long thin line behind like the scar on a stomach. There are lines of jettisoned oil along the beach. The landscape serves as a demonstration of our acts, our adventures with poison, speed and disregard. Still, it is not yet entirely overwhelmed, but takes us with it; insisting on the order and integrity of natural growth. Behind the landscape there remains that scope where the fish run like galaxies in the heavens. And while the seasons change and weather fronts move through, living things respond with a sureness, delicacy and rhythmic strength. They are the signs, not of any special claim but of a lasting, repeated emphasis on basic capacity, infinite resourcefulness. They say to me that I still have a chance to belong."

John Hay in the same book, a few pages on.

robert wolff, 5 november 2009