

Eco-Res Forum – Exploring the Ethical, Political and Socio-Cultural Aspects of Climate Change
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John Cairns' Posting #7
BEYOND ECOCENTRISM
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Most postings to this Forum have highlighted ways to avoid damage to ecosystems, but promoting ecological health as the primary goal requires at least two steps beyond ecocentrism. Step one is to regard the relationship between humankind and natural systems as co-evolutionary (Cairns 2007). Since humans are dependent upon the biospheric life support system for a variety of services (e.g., maintaining the atmospheric gas balance) and the health of the biospheric life support system depends upon an ecologically literate human society that understands the laws of nature, the relationship must be mutualistic. Since both human society and natural systems are dynamic and constantly changing, continual adjustments in the relationship are essential. Furthermore, at present, humankind is also dependent upon a technological life support system that must be managed to promote the health and integrity of natural systems.

Havel (1990) noted that hope "is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that it makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." This certainty is the case with the transition from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric viewpoint, even though the transition seems a formidable, perhaps impossible, task. In his book *Blessed Unrest*, Hawken (2007) estimates that one, perhaps even two, million organizations are working toward ecological sustainability and social justice. He notes that, by conventional definition, this progression is not a movement since movements have leaders and ideologies. What Hawken found is clearly a collective response to threat. A brief summary of this concept appears in the May/June 2007 issue of *Orion Magazine*, which also contains an article by Christopher Cokinos entitled "The Consolations of Extinction" (<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/268>). In this article, Cokinos notes that 99.9% of all species that have ever evolved on this planet are gone forever. Cokinos concludes that civilization is not a given, but extinction is.

About 250 million years ago, the end-Permian extinction caused about 95% of all species to be lost. Among the possible causes was the sudden release of methane stored in permafrost and underwater ice. The early Triassic, which followed, was not conducive to most of the biota due to dust, heat, and choking fumes. Douglas Erwin's book *Extinction: How Life on Earth Nearly Ended 250 Million Years Ago* should be required reading for those who espouse ecocentrism but insist on particular conditions (their favorite subcause) before becoming entirely committed. Erwin has a very pragmatic approach – if humankind is now in a mass extinction, it is probably doomed. If not, then enough time may be available to preserve more than once was thought possible. As Erwin (via Cokinos) notes, the consolations of extinctions are the comforts of deep time, an acceptance of passage. In my opinion, none of these concepts prevents humankind from saving other creatures and itself.

Step two is to develop the ecolate perspective that Garrett Hardin espoused in *Living within Limits: Ecology, Economics, and Population Taboos* (1993). Because Hardin wrote extensively on emotion-laden subjects such as abortion, population growth, immigration, lifeboat ethics, sustainability, and optimum population size, his views were irritating to people and were often ignored. All of Hardin's publications are appropriate for the participants of this Forum, but, arguably, the most appropriate is *Exploring New Ethics for Survival: The Voyage of the Spaceship Beagle* (The Viking Press 1972), especially Chapter 20, "End of an Orgy." As Hardin noted, "feel good" social, ethical, political, and ethnic rhetoric does not lead to sustainable use of the planet. Hardin was widely recognized as an intellectual leader (he was a member of the American Philosophical Society), but his vivid descriptions of the need for unpalatable decisions scared too many people. However, many of the descriptions are true at present of the ways climate change threatens international peace and security (Homer-Dixon 2007). A vast body of scientific evidence indicates that, within the next generation's lifetimes (and even the present generation), severe droughts (Australia's "Big Dry"), storms, and heat waves caused by climate change could destabilize societies worldwide. Sea level rise is already causing problems for low lying islands and soon could cause coastal environmental refugees to number in the millions. Britain, as the

April 2007 head of the United Nations Security Council, convened a debate on security problems caused by climate change. In the United States, a panel of 11 retired generals and admirals warned that climate change is already a "threat multiplier" in the world's fragile regions, exacerbating conditions that lead to failed nations – the breeding grounds for extremism and terrorism. Garrett Hardin's predictions, made, in some cases, over three decades ago, are now a reality. Perhaps his strong measures will make sense soon! May it be so!

Literature Cited

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