

The Fisherman and His Wife: More Does Not Make You Happy*

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Human nature, in no form of it, could ever bear prosperity.

John Adams
Letter to Thomas Jefferson

Success has made failures of many men.

Cindy Adams

Failure changes for the better, success for the worse.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

The tale of the fisherman and his wife (collected by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm) is about greed and recognizing when enough is enough. Basically, a fisherman and his wife live in a filthy shack near the sea. One day, the fisherman catches and releases a flounder that is an enchanted prince. When the fisherman relates the experience to his wife, she tells him to go back to the fish and ask for a little cottage for them. The flounder immediately grants the wish and, when the fisherman returns to his wife, she has a nice, little cottage. However, the wife is not satisfied and sends the fisherman back to ask for a palace; the wish is granted. Next, the wife wants a kingdom; the wish is granted. Then she wants to be emperor; the wish is granted. She continues by asking to be like God; however, the flounder sends the fisherman home to his wife, who is in their filthy shack again. Often the addiction to material possessions and the desire for more does not ensure satisfaction or happiness.

In its quest for evermore material possessions, humankind has impoverished the biosphere, and profligate use of fossil fuel has added more greenhouse gases to the atmosphere than the biosphere can assimilate. The result is that global climate change is already endangering human society. Politicians seem unable to grasp that the only solution is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions until they match the biosphere's assimilative capacity for them. Percentage reductions of greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050 or 20% by 2020 have no relationship to the biosphere's assimilative capacity (which is not constant) for greenhouse gases.

In short, humankind's quest for more material goods and energy has endangered the biosphere, altered Earth's climate, and still left billions of people in poverty. The upper 1% of the planet's population has accumulated much wealth, but the rest of the population has not. Even the very wealthy do not feel more secure and have not achieved happiness (i.e., satisfaction in life). Present destruction of the biospheric life support system brings neither security nor happiness, so why do people still want more?