

The Midas Touch in the 21st Century*

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One day when King Midas was walking in his garden, he saw an elderly satyr asleep in the flowers. Taking pity on the old fellow, King Midas let him go without punishment. When the god Dionysus heard about it, he rewarded the king by granting him one wish. The king thought about it for a second and then said: "I wish for everything I touch to turn to gold." And so it was.

The beautiful flowers in his garden turned toward the sun for light, but when Midas approached and touched them, they stood rigid and gold. The king grew hungry and thin, for each time he tried to eat, he found that his meal had turned to gold. His lovely daughter, at his loving touch, turned hard and fast to gold. His water, his bed, his clothes, his friends, and eventually the whole palace was gold.

King Midas saw that soon his whole kingdom would turn to gold unless he did something right away. He asked Dionysus to turn everything back to the way it had been and take back his golden touch. Because the king was ashamed and very sad, Dionysus took pity on him and granted his request. Instantly, King Midas was poorer than he had been, but richer, he felt, in the things that really count.

(from <http://www.hipark.austin.isd.tenet.edu/mythology/midas.html>)

The 21st century equivalent of gold is economic growth – everything humans touch in the biosphere (i.e., natural systems) is degraded and all too soon ends up as trash or artifacts (e.g., shopping malls) that displace natural habitats and cause species impoverishment. Unfortunately, the mythical god Dionysus cannot return Earth to its previous ecological state. However, preserving the present biosphere may still be possible, but would require an immediate massive change in human practices (e.g., reduce human population size to fit Earth's carrying capacity).

Following each of the five great species extinctions on Earth, a new biosphere evolved. Such an event will probably occur after the sixth great extinction (which is now in progress). Of course, predicting what the new biosphere will be like is impossible, but the species composition of Earth changed after each of the five great extinctions and will presumably happen again. Adaptation to the rapidly changing conditions during the transition from one biosphere to another will not be easy for any species, including humans.

Careful examination of the problems of adapting during a transition period where rapid change is the norm and adapting to a quite different new biosphere might persuade humankind to nurture the present biosphere with the hope that it might be saved. Estimating how close the present biosphere is to a major tipping point is not possible. As a consequence, nurturing should begin at once, even though the effectiveness of this nurturing is uncertain. However, equal or greater uncertainty exists about humankind's ability to adapt to the conditions (e.g., atmosphere) produced by the new biosphere.

King Midas was fortunate in having his "golden touch" reversed by Dionysus, but humankind must reverse its "trashing touch" itself. Yes, humankind can!