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"Do We Need Nature?"

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Synopsis

Humanity at this juncture in time, in spite of the advances in technology, needs nature now more than ever. The natural world is a truly wondrous marvel to behold. This is true whether one views it as the defining act of an all-powerful Creator or a fluke of random events and ideal conditions that through the process of mutation, natural selection and evolution formed the bio-system that we inhabit today.

Mankind needs nature, if not for reasons of sheer practicality, than for the benefits that it provides the soul. Wilderness represents the last vestiges of a natural order from which man long ago attempted to extricate himself. It is a refuge that can heal, restore and strengthen the human spirit, which is essential to our very survival. Yet with all of our current progress, we continue to mindlessly consume natural resources and despoil the few remaining pristine tracts of wilderness that exist. If we do not as a collective whole start acting more responsibly, and minimizing our impact upon the natural world, we risk jeopardizing not only the well-being of the planet's myriad of other life forms, but perhaps our own species as well.

So for those who doubt that we are as reliant today upon the beauty and bounty of the natural world as generations past, I offer this challenge. Awake early one morning and watch the sun rise. Spend a day paddling or sailing a river, alpine lake or coastline. Camp in a remote area and as dusk descends, listen to the sounds of the night coming alive just beyond the light of your fire. Sample these and various other wilderness experiences and then look into your heart and ask yourself but one simple question -- who am I to deny these pleasures to the generations that will follow?

Do We Need Nature?

"Do we need nature?" is a pointed question that from this observer's viewpoint deserves an unqualified response -- "Absolutely, and now more than ever." The natural world, of which humanity is a part despite the efforts of some to separate our kind, is a truly wondrous marvel to behold. This holds true whether one views it as the defining act of an all-powerful Creator or a fluke of random events and ideal conditions that through the process of mutation, natural selection and evolution formed the bio-system that we inhabit today.

Yet there are those among us who seem to believe that the systematic destruction or over-utilization of the natural resources with which much of this planet is blessed is simply an inevitable stage of mankind's ongoing progress. It is dangerously narrow-minded to believe that somehow humans are an element distinct from the natural world, staring down upon this planet from some lofty perch, unquestioned masters of our domain. While it is undeniable that of all the species on the planet, only man has the ability to alter the natural world on a global level, for better or worse, the reality is that ultimately nature will bend man to its will, and not the other way around.

Make no mistake. In all likelihood, it is humanity's hubris and steadfast belief that it can shape the natural world without suffering unforeseen consequences that will negatively impact and possibly doom future generations. This outcome is by no means predetermined or fated, but judging from the often poor or shortsighted decisions that have been made in the past, if mankind continues on its current trajectory we are in danger of destroying or forever altering an alarming amount of our natural resources. Perhaps as resourceful creatures, we will adapt to this changed environment, but even if we do so, will survival in such a world be meaningful? If the air that we breathe becomes poisoned, if the water that we drink must be filtered and carefully rationed, if the land that we walk upon is stripped of its features to make way for new developments, condominiums and strip malls, what kind of existence is this really?

Mankind needs nature, if not for reasons of sheer practicality, than for the benefits that it provides to the human soul. Even those folks who dwell in modern cities with all that entails have a yearning in their souls for the wild and unconquerable, even if they have never given it second thought or contemplation. Wilderness represents the last vestiges of a natural order from which man long ago attempted to extricate himself, to perch triumphantly on a pedestal unfettered by the laws that govern life as we know it. It is a refuge that can heal, restore and strengthen the human spirit as we interact with a world that, for some among us, is as alien and foreign as the surface of the moon. Yet despite this unfamiliarity and the challenges it poses, the wilderness speaks to some primitive part of our brain that recognizes the environment in which our ancestors struggled for survival.

These days, there is often talk of utilizing technology to improve upon nature. True, our increased understanding and mastery of science and genetics has enabled us to create pest-resistant crops, or to select out the most desirable traits in plants and animals for

increased efficiency and yield. Certainly, some of these advancements can benefit humans living in areas that traditionally have struggled to raise enough food to support the local populations. Yet there are still dangers associated with this progress.

Some would argue that humans have no right to alter the natural order of things, to recombine genes or clone cells or otherwise impede the ebb and flow that accompanies the life cycles of all living organisms. Whether one looks at this situation from an evolutionary or Creationist standpoint, the conclusion is still the same – man clearly has the power to act in a certain way, but is it morally and ethically defensible to do so? Is mankind in effect, “Playing God” as critics would charge, engaging in behavior that actually modifies or alters life, or creates organisms that would not or could not exist without an intervening hand?

Still, despite advances in medicine and technology, humankind finds itself faced with seemingly exotic new diseases that capture headlines, blights such as SARS and “monkeypox,” or worse, mutated forms of old familiar viruses and bacteria that have grown increasingly resistant to the drugs formerly used to combat their spread. Some scientists and researchers are convinced that the cures for many of these ills lie in nature, perhaps in the rapidly diminishing rain forests or other preserves that have yet to be fully explored by 21st Century Man. Perhaps this possibility in of itself is reason alone for us to be far more conscientious about preserving and safeguarding such resources. In the face of such pestilence, it’s hard not to argue that modern man’s technology should be marshaled to defeat these threats. Yet ironically, these very diseases seem to be nature’s response to earlier efforts to eradicate the organisms responsible for such sickness. After all, hasn’t the widespread use of antibiotics often led to strains of bacteria that have grown increasingly resistant to such treatment? Like it or not, nature seems to always find a way to achieve balance, and ultimately, we are simply another organism competing for survival in an ecosystem with limited resources.

Because of the position that mankind holds in this fragile web of life, he is obligated with a stewardship of the planet unique to all life that inhabits it. Acting without a clear moral and ethical framework, humanity is capable of extreme destruction of the environment and all that inhabits it. With power comes responsibility, yet mankind’s record in this regard is spotty at best. As a species, we tend to be impatient and extremely self-serving, acting upon the very same base instincts that the most primitive of animals display in abundance – looking for our next meal, or establishing our position in the social order through brute strength, aggression, or the hoarding of resources.

We live in a world that exists in a state of delicate balance, with an endless cycle of death and re-birth, of resources consumed and if we’re lucky, gradually replenished. Yet many of us who dwell in the so-called “First World” countries lead lifestyles that emphasize mass consumption and consumerism. We find ourselves stuck in an endless feedback cycle that constantly reinforces the notion that the key to our happiness and overall welfare is to accumulate more and more material goods. Increasingly, in order to fulfill this insatiable demand, we turn to the more impoverished nations to actually produce that which we desire, since this can be done far more cheaply and efficiently in

societies where working conditions are not subject to much oversight or regulation. Furthermore, the destruction or pollution of the environment within these locales is rarely given much thought, since it conflicts with the short-term need to employ the local population.

Perhaps we as a species are gradually falling victim to our own success. While the reign of man's dominance in the world is merely a blip when viewed from the geological perspective, year after year the world's population grows larger. What's worrisome in the face of our specie's explosive growth is that we are literally running out of room to sustain this population, and taxing the environment's ability to provide sustenance to these multitudes. Even if we were to rise above our predilection for violence and the constant pollution or over-exploitation of the environment that seems to accompany so many of our technological advances, we will reach a point in which life threatens to become very unpleasant for the masses.

So what solutions can be offered to these challenges? Regrettably, many of these solutions require a level of discipline and possibly some measure of inconvenience and self-sacrifice that many will be loath to bear. Clearly one of the most important issues facing us is finding non-polluting and sustainable alternatives to fossil fuels. For much of the past few decades this has been a holy grail, as alarmist predictions about the plummeting global availability of such resources, or the geo-political implications of dependence upon these vital resources have suggested a dire need for substitute forms of power. Many have turned to nature in the form of water (hydro-electric), wind or solar power, but widespread adoption of these alternatives has been slow due to higher initial costs, lack of infrastructure to support such endeavors, or the perception that such initiatives are not worth the effort to refine their use.

It seems an indisputable assumption that barring a widespread cataclysm, modern societies will not return to the often-nomadic ways of our ancestors or so-called modern "primitive" cultures. While many admire the ability of hunter-gatherer and early agrarian cultures to live in harmony with their surroundings, it is unrealistic to expect that most people would give up the relative comforts of modern society to live in the "old ways." However, in our increasingly fragmented world in which convenience items and material possessions seem to serve as substitutes for truly lived lives, if we do not find a balance soon, we risk jeopardizing the future. It is ironic that as many of us become more disconnected from nature, or expect to encounter our natural environment in pre-packaged, easily digested chunks with a modicum of risk (e.g. nature parks, "adventure" travel), there remains a yearning for simpler pleasures and a deeper connection to the earth.

So for those who doubt that we are as reliant today upon the beauty and bounty of the natural world as generations past, I offer this challenge. Awake early one morning and watch the sun rise. Spend a day paddling or sailing a river, alpine lake or coastline. Camp in a remote area and as dusk descends, listen to the sounds of the night coming alive just beyond the light of your fire. Sample these and various other wilderness experiences and

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