

Letter from Gustavus

Leading the World to Sustainability

November 16, 1993

The issue of sustainability cuts both ways. From the viewpoint of those who would sustain the current human population, economic, and energy systems, it means steady increase of all three. For those who seek balance between our species and the biosphere's other forms of life and material resources, it means a decrease of human populations and demands to a level sustainable by harvest and husbandry. The one is the dynamo racing ever-faster to keep up. The other is the brake and the flywheel—RPMs in the green, not the red, of the dial.

Despite the obvious disparities between increasing populations and diminishing resources, current systems proceed apace. Periodically, technological fixes like the Green Revolution—always short-lived—sustain the myth that we can keep on doing what we have done in the past. It matters not that simple numbers and their changing ratios point to inexorable decline of calories, energy units, and quality of life for our children and their children, nor that the lower levels of that slope down which we now slide will be Dante-esque zones of mere survival for the fortunate and trampling by the Four Horsemen for the rest.

Why this blindness? Because denial is strong and present necessity determines. Because political leaders dare not propose the radical and politically lethal changes to meet long-term necessity. Thus do the politics and economics of binding scarcity spawn a worldwide Culture of Poverty that discounts the future in favor of desperate measures to sustain the current systems, even though they are destined to fail. We see the symptoms around the world and within our respective societies—elbow-swinging competition and inequity that breeds murders at home and wars abroad. We put on our blinders and dig

deeper in our mining of the earth for its remaining resources, which should be used for the transition to saner ways. Lacking alternatives, we are trapped where we live, where we work, and in what we do. I think of the peasant farmers of the Danube Basin, tilling their fields year after year as the Mongol Hordes advanced ever-closer, finally to overwhelm them. "But we must eat," they said, until almost the moment before the horsemen of the steppes charged.

What do *we* do in such a time? We convert our parks, these incredible treasures bequeathed by our ancestors, into beacons of enlightenment. There is no profit in and no time for despair. We park people in every nation hold in trust natural and cultural environments/laboratories/schools that can help our respective bodies politic to see the truth, the pragmatic truth of our predicament as a volatile, out-of-control species. We hold the remnant landscapes and gene pools that, as models and reservoirs, can help to replenish the battered earth.

In these places we can demonstrate truths that transcend destructive abstractions of belief, myth, and tribalism. In perilous times we have unparalleled opportunity to help create sustaining belief, myth, and community.

As the imperatives for reversing humankind's present collision course become ever-clearer, the parklands of the world can serve with other healing forces to provide alternatives, to show the limits upon us, to find intangible, non-consumptive forms of wealth and satisfaction.

All of this resides squarely in our respective park missions: Inspiration—yes. Education—yes. Environmental health—yes. Social inclusion and healing—yes. Scientific research, including global-change networking and forecasting—yes. These are some of the reasons for which natural and cultural parks have been set aside. There are many more—all of them contributory to reform.

We in fact violate our public trust if we default on these broad duties and obligations. We become mere facility managers—emptying the trash and clipping the grass. None of our parks came into being with such mundane functions (however necessary) as justification. All symbolize higher value systems.

Then let us employ these places and the value systems they represent to help humanity save itself, and the world, and indeed the parklands themselves—which can survive only in context. And let us start, each of us, right where we are. Don't wait for the thunderbolt from on high. Create your own direction, then form alliances with people of like mind. Your own park story—human and natural—is where you begin.

This issue of THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM will give you some clues.

Keep the faith,

Bill Brown