

Letter from Gustavus

While Rome Burns

June 11, 1994

ON THE SUBJECT OF POPULATION the human capacity for folly would seem to be infinite. In all cases and across all cultures the blindness that besets us, on this matter, is an anachronism.

Most familiarly, this blindness comes to us in the religious triune descended from the vision of a few thousand threatened nomads in ancient Israel. The inspiring pronouncement from their God to “multiply and subdue the Earth” still reigns over half the world—from the islands of Indonesia, across vast stretches of Asia, Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the multitude of farther outposts established by Jews, Christians, and Islamics.

In peasant societies, like India and China, a multitude of offspring still guarantees the requisite work force for intensive agriculture, and the care and shelter of aging parents.

In pastoral societies, from the Navajo Reservation to the savannahs and highlands of Africa, wealth and social status still depend on the numbers of livestock possessed.

It matters not that these livestock crater the soil itself in search of sustenance; nor that peasant plots divide and deplete to feed the multitudes whose very night-soil can't compensate the drain; nor that mechanized monoculture diverts the rivers and salts the world's best soils to feed the urban masses of industrialized countries. Nor that all of these results of perpetuated myths combine to desertify the Earth, kill its other inhabitants, and render land and water dead and poisonous.

And don't look for consistency of thought. People who know very well the limits of cows in a pasture continue to prate the notion that there is room for all of us and our doubling descendants.

In sum, we seem unable to face reality. Ignorance is part of it, in large parts of the world. But mostly our obliviousness to the most obvious signs of ecosystem and biospheric deterioration stems from two causes:

1. The utterly false notion inherited from ancient forebears of many religious stripes that we, human beings, are exempt from natural constraints, which, as most of us very well know, apply remorselessly to all other earthly inhabitants.

2. The hubristic idea—a modern secular perversion of the ancient belief in the Deity's merciful interventions for the Chosen People—that science and technology will save us. In its cruder form this means that we can dig deeper, change the course of rivers, replenish the deserts of our own making, and so on. A sobering example of this new faith is the Aswan Dam in Egypt, whose disruption of the Nile's annual replenishment of river-corridor soils and delta nutrients has—in less than thirty years—doomed the seething, multiplying population of a place that once knew sustainable civilization over millennia. Before we tut-tut the Egyptians (and the Russians who built the dam, beating our own aid program to the punch), we should look at our own devastation of the richest soil base in the world (aside from the Ukraine) in the Mississippi Basin, not to mention the destruction of the closest thing in Eden the New World knew, California.

In its highest form the new faith recalls the Titan, Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods. Unfortunately, we have no Hercules to kill the eagle that wrathful Zeus sent to eat the bound Prometheus' liver each day. And the mere centuries of his suffering

are as nothing compared with the millions of years of half-lives ticking away in the nuclear genie we have already unleashed—in the already-obsolescent, condemned power plants that still generate electricity, though they are bombs waiting to blow; in the piles of Cold War weapons now being traded to any solvent megalomaniac for food; in the waste, from both peace and war applications, whose storage and care is present disgrace and inevitable future tragedy.



In large part, the madness manifested in these selected examples stems from the desperate need to feed and sustain large populations of human beings. We, acting as nation-states (and more recently as international corporations), mine to sterility all resources within our respective boundaries, and, if we are powerful, we take the lands and resources of others by economic or military means. The poor of the world join in the process, for slave wages, or stand by and starve as we mine their patrimony.

What does all this mean in terms of preserved lands? Well, isn't it obvious? Unless we as a species begin applying the same rules to ourselves as we routinely apply to scientific husbandry there will be no more preserved lands, or seas, or any other ecosystem. They will be invaded and consumed, overtly or subtly, until they are no more.

That process is already well advanced in Third World countries where desperate measures center on tactics for the next meal and parks and preserves employ small armies to save wildlife, and habitats being stripped for fuel and forage. For the relatively rich First World countries, strategic desperation is well advanced, but is allayed and camouflaged by rapacious extraction and importation from the poorer countries. But those sources are running out. Despite our illusions, even in the United States tactical desperation is pervasive. In our dying cities and devastated rural and once-industrial areas, our condition is different only in degree, and an evaporating insulation of timing, from that of Calcutta or the dust-blown villages of the Deccan plateau or the gutted industrial sectors of Eastern Europe.

No discussion of wildlife, habitat, or ecosystem preservation has any long-term meaning unless the human condition of overpopulation, and its amelioration and eventual solution, is the overarching context of discourse. All else is fiddling while Rome burns, playing games with research plots, taking record photos before assured destruction. Assuredly, all of these things must be going on. But if they go on in other than a context of human population control they will have no bearing on coming realities.