

Letter from Gustavus

Islands of Hope—Now More Than Ever

August 12, 1996

About a quarter of a century ago I wrote a book called *Islands of Hope*. The idea was that National Parks and similar preserves are great places to convey the environmental ethic—outdoor laboratories and pulpits where human reintegration with the rest of the world could be demonstrated and projected outward to the society at large.

The motivation for this effort was a threefold, feedback premise:

- ❖ without such preserves humankind would lack expansive, benchmark control zones to measure and understand the impacts of modern, high-tech societies upon the biosphere;
- ❖ without such knowledge people could not develop the principles and practices necessary for fundamental environmental reform;
- ❖ lacking environmental reform, the biosphere and its dependent societies would continue to decline in health and vigor, taking the parks and other preserves down with them;
- ❖ without such preserves (and so on).



But that was then. This is now. The world is older, more tattered, heavier with more of us. True, we made some improvements of the sorts that affect what we see and what we smell, breathe, eat, and drink. Welcome as they are, these reforms constitute hard-fought and—considered worldwide—spotty ameliorations within a fundamentally unchanged social and technological system.

That system recently empowered by computerization and instant data transmission, now enfolds the world. And its voracity probes the far places to meet the needs of burgeoning humanity. Thus have human technology and fecundity teamed up to make the present condition.

As world population increased by 50 percent over that 25-year span, the rich nations got richer. But most of the world made little or no progress—neither for masses of human beings (beyond mere survival) nor for the health of the world ecosystem (stretched ever closer to its extractive and absorptive ca-

pacities). Rather, the poor nations got poorer, more crowded, and more urbanized. Peasants and pastoralists, crowded out of exhausted homelands (or expelled from prime lands converted to mechanized agribusiness), fled to the cities, or rather to their surrounding shanty-slums with no water or septic systems.

This pell-mell explosion of megacities—as dumps for excess rural people—in countries that were 80 percent rural only yesterday filled the agenda at the June 1996 U.N. Habitat Conference in Istanbul. There the delegates pondered these festering concentrations of dispossessed and desperate people. What do these multiplying, overloaded megacities portend for the future? In terms of common decency and compassion? . . . economic exploitation? . . . political instability? . . . mass migrations? . . . spreading disease and misery and terror? Forget containment in a world where no place is farther than a day's journey from any other place.



So in the big picture, the age of environmentalism, despite contrary propaganda, is not over. At its deeper level it hasn't even started.

And it is in deep trouble. The ideological backlash generated by the timid reforms that began in the Sixties has hobbled—and tainted with a demonizing tarbrush—the environmental-reform movement, co-opted much of its establishment, and tamed political leaders. These leaders should, in fact, be mobilizing all nations for the fundamental reforms needed to reclaim a healthy, sustaining biosphere for people and our fellow passengers on this, our only available living planet.

This transcendent moral and pragmatic issue should override all of the petty politics and bloody tribal wars that trivialize and worsen the human condition. Instead, in the United States (with variations in other countries) we are plagued with the Wise Use Movement and similar throwback groups whose corporation-funded think tanks and political committees work to wreck reform.

These people, variously, will not or cannot face biological facts, the most important of these being that humans at home on the biosphere are, biologically speaking, no different from cows at home on the range. Any good cattle rancher knows the limits of his or her range. People who live directly off the land have always understood that this same imperative applies to humans.

To deny that our species, as all others, must abide by the limits of a finite world takes a lot of rationalization. Then comes conversion of these rationales to plausible propaganda. Thus armed, the forces of manipulation go forth to exploit alienation, ignorance, and desperation.

It is a good time for such manipulation, particularly in the United States—a country until recently insulated from finitude. The millennium approaches. This nation, king of the hill only a breath past, suddenly knows doubt and fear.

Strange apparitions, terrorism, invade the collective consciousness. Alienation and the anxiety of economic insecurity prey upon the people. Corrupted politics produces cynicism across the land, expressed as lack of faith in governments—even in governance itself. Groups withdraw from society—religious, survivalist, anarchist. Jobs migrate elsewhere as a new global economy subjects the people of this once-abundant, self-sufficient, and insulated country to the kinds of travails that long have prevailed and are today the norm in other less-fortunate places. Social fragmentation and domestic chaos reign, not only overseas, where—as we smugly perceived—they always held sway, but now, right here at home in the good old USA. Perhaps, after all, secular democracy has failed!

The title and the substance of Marshall Berman's book, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, perfectly captures the angst of modernity, the erosive affliction of the age.

So people turn to ideological, theological, and absolutist certainties. And there are those who are willing, and paid, to lead them to the wrong battles on the wrong battlefields. Granted that most of these fearful and distraught people sincerely and justifiably seek solid ground to live their lives on. They also, in the large, lack historical perspective and knowledge of environmental affairs.

This volatile combination, mobilized in the service of selfish and ideologically narrow factions, proceeds apace to break the bonds and balances of democratic government. Such government rests on the compromised, consensual center, with live-and-let-live tolerance granted to the fringes. No single faction or philosophy "wins" in the functioning democratic government. That is what our Constitution is all about. But today common courtesy and collegiality fade away. Polluted public discourse, dominated by absolutist stridency, in turn poisons the democratic processes designed to help people of different views and interests find common ground: that zone where justice and equity determines the balance between singular interests and the public good of the inclusive community. The current "take no prisoners" attitudes and expressions of public debate lead us toward the balkanization of this American nation.



The methods employed to pervert public discourse are many and varied: Philosophy and history scrambled and rewritten. False science purveyed as truth, used as acid in the face of established fact and the looming patterns that warn us. Polluters of politics using falsehood and fear to degrade the principle that government in this country was designed to serve: the principle of public good. Demonization of those who attempt to perform government's valid and necessary duties as mediator between the powerful and the weak, and between the private and public realms. Reckless elevation of private rights at the ex-

pense of community obligations and well being. Wholesale damnation, as distinct from valid reform of regulatory regimes essential to the balances of civil, safe, and equitable society. Feeding the legislative fires of absolutist religious and social tenets—guaranteed by the Bill of Rights as matters of individual choice, but prohibited as the domain of government.

This is the fabric of propaganda that covers the hidden agendas of greed, inequity, and unconstrained power for the few.



In the field of environmentalism—which in this country is based on the three legs of livable home environments, public health, and public lands—all of the above tactics and strands can be discerned.

Civil society, as directly embodied by local governments, is strapped by local tax caps and by skewed national priorities that have produced crippling national indebtedness and a dearth of discretionary funds for the betterment of communities. With both infrastructural and social necessities deferred, our cities decay—their increasing inequities leading to class warfare. In a reversal from Third World countries, based on the different sequences of our histories, those well-off enough to do so have fled the cities for suburb and country, leaving the central cities, except during business hours, to the abandoned poor and the dysfunctional.

In all categories of decent life—social amity and security, housing, education, esthetics, rudimentary public services—the millions of abandoned people are victimized by calculated deficiencies and neglect. This forsaking of our fellows feeds a socio-environmental cancer that can destroy this country.

Relying on negative efforts such as stiffer sentences and bigger prisons, we—as a society—have not begun to touch fundamental causes, much less to develop and implement the long-term solutions to this imminently mortal tumor in our body social and political. Rather—disregarding the history that created these pools of isolation and suffering, and perverting the sciences that illuminate social pathology and recovery—we blame those who suffer and the programs and people that have tried to help them. There exists no sadder commentary on the decay of civic tradition in this country, nor of the prostitution of political and academic integrity.

The bent rationalizations for abandonment and prison storage solve none of the problems of the more fortunate. They only deepen them. They lead us ever closer to comprehensive social collapse.

Thus: Slick, high-priced propaganda for short-term gain under the cover of scapegoating shapes the dismal excuses for social trust, harnessing fear and ignorance, hoodwink a confused electorate to act against its own interests.

It is odd that the hired guns and hi-tech cowboys of today's American

Way—who tout humankind as part of nature, and view mechanized environmental destruction as “only natural”—fail to see connections between environmental degradation and social pathology. They may agree that crowded rats in a cage eat each others’ tails. But they refuse the parallel between that behavior and the equivalent anti-social behavior of crowded, despairing human beings. Indeed, we are all parts of nature.

The social environment, along with whatever gene combinations nature bestowed upon each of us, largely determines the fate of all but the more exceptional and lucky of humankind.

Our continued neglect and disrepair of the social environment will kill us quicker than the accumulating poisons in the public-health environment or the assault upon the public lands. Moreover, the social conflict that moves ever closer to open warfare (barring emergency remedies quickly followed by substantial and structural ones) will consume the social energy and material resources that the country needs to deal with more commonly understood environmental challenges.

At whatever cost this country must restore hope—based on compassion and equity and enduring commitment—in the desertified parts of our society. The only good news here is that the accursed and abused, the neglected and abandoned have, in their larger numbers, continued to have faith in the moral principles and the Constitutional law of this country. We are about at the end of the rope in that regard. We must prove up now.



The environmental laws and regulatory programs that protect public health affect every citizen, including children in the womb (and the very chromosomes that combine to make them). The presently dominant anti-government zealots—chanting their mantras of minimal (18th-century) government, deregulation, budget cuts, and agency downsizing—gut the laws and starve the testing and monitoring programs that guard us all (in this complex, exponentially evolved society) from chemicals, drugs, and other dangerous products.

Thirty-four years ago, with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, the country-at-large became aware of the cost and dangers of accumulating toxic chemicals—many of them synthetics unknown in nature. Pesticides and other poisons developed in industrial laboratories were packaged and sold with little or no knowledge of their specific long-term (much less their synergistic) effects. Overused and carelessly dumped into air, soil, and water, they accumulated in the food chain and in the air and water of daily existence. People got sick, and didn’t know why. Lakes in the process of dying produced mutant and diseased fish. Birds that ingested DDT and similar toxins laid eggs that broke and couldn’t be hatched.

Other overloads made headlines back in those days. Feces floated where people swam. Green and purple stuff roared out of factory pipes directly into major rivers, the water supply for all those downstream. Some rivers burst into flames, ignited by a flipped cigarette butt.

The air we breathe thickened and invaded our lungs and brains with lead and caustics and many other concentrations that made us cry and cough and stay home from work with mysterious illnesses.

This may seem like old history, but the kinds of people who did that stuff then, before protective public agencies started looking over their shoulders, are still with us. It's people of this ilk, and their beholden spin doctors and politicians, who violate the public trust. And at every opportunity ambush these agencies in Congressional hearings and secretly insert disabling riders in critical legislation.

A long time ago Charles Dickens wrote social-history novels that accurately portrayed the abuses of the early Industrial Revolution in England, and the absolute contempt of men of private power for the common citizen. Our own late 19th- and early 20th-century progressive and muckraking literature documents that same malfeasance and contempt in this country.

With the surge of industrial and R&D power of World War II and succeeding decades, we were changing the chemistry of the common air and water and soil. We were swallowing incredibly potent pills whose effects would show in deformed babies, or in crippling illnesses that had incubated in the pill-takers for 20 years. We were eating things that made rats die in laboratories.

It was time to take stock and institute controls for the public welfare of the nation. Rachel Carson's book dramatized this mad progression which, unchecked, would make a toxic stew of the whole country.

Then followed bipartisan efforts in the Sixties and Seventies that developed the body of environmental law that gave us some relief from the Social Darwinism that a caveat emptor free-enterprise system was imposing on us—until then, a nearly defenseless citizenry. The public-health agencies and programs enacted in those years, however minimalist their charters, established or greatly strengthened public controls affecting clean air, clean water, consumer protection, toxic waste disposal, nuclear safety, occupational health, drug and chemical testing, medical research, and a host of other categories.

Only constant vigilance protects these zones of public concern. Yet, today, the agencies that oversee these concerns bleed white from the wounds of the long knives on Capitol Hill. This is not management reform or rationalization of regulation or pruning of deadwood. This is demolition. Nothing more blatantly demonstrates the malignant ignorance (or, for those who know better, the kept and calculated malignancy) of the zealots. With this assault on the public health of the nation and its generations yet unborn, these transient, strutting ideologues dismantle the public trust and mortgage the health of fu-

ture generations.

It grates me to hear these anti-social people talk about social and family values. And it is beyond reckoning that they cannot see that the commonweal includes them and their descendants. For, as the whole goes, so will go its parts.

For many of the reasons cited above—among them decaying infrastructures, insidious synergisms of introduced and alien materials, instantaneous worldwide exposure to epidemics, and collapsing monitoring systems—this country faces ever-mounting public health problems. Item: Today, the health of this nation's children is in the lower ranks of industrialized nations. Another, technical, example: We have not the foggiest notion yet of how to handle the moribund nuclear-energy enterprise—neither the military nor the peaceful manifestations of it. First we must decommission—at immense cost—the obsolescent power plants and the decaying weaponry. Then must follow scores of thousands of years of uninterrupted controlled storage and monitoring of these infinitely lethal, long-lived, and volatile materials. This in turn will require an enduring political stability and technical continuity unknown in and longer than recorded human history—a period of time that, moving backwards, would land us in the age of Neanderthal Man; a period of time that will make the 3,000 years of Ancient Egypt's dynastic history seem like lunch hour.

We are told that the invisible hand of the market will solve all such problems. We are told that the public sector is dead. On the face of it, just for the exemplary nuclear issue—one of many similarly complex issues—such assertions lack any merit or plausibility. They are the primitive slogans of rigorously uninformed minds.

Given the ruthless sacrifice of communities and whole regions of the country (and the greater part of the Southern Hemisphere) to the imperatives of bottom-line corporate greed, who can imagine the market taking on *pro bono publico* tasks over several thousand years. We might be able to count on a 6-months' public relations campaign.



In the zone of public lands and biological preserves—those benchmarks where wisdom might be learned and turned to general reform—erosion of acreage and quality habitat accelerates. These reductions come as directed and specific assaults, and as indirect degradations flowing from the general decline of the biosphere. Worldwide, the scramble for diminishing raw materials, fuels, and foods progressively transforms these lands from their dedicated purposes to final reservoirs of untapped natural resources. The intertwined trajectories of soaring population and matching production demands constitute, if unchecked, the master trendline of the coming age.

This context, writ large on the wall, tells us that sheer human numbers

combined with systems that promote insatiable per capita demands for more material goods, will homogenize the degrading biosphere, and the human experience within it. The last refuges for esthetic adventure in untrammelled natural settings, for ecological integrity, and for human transformation based on biological wisdom will become extinct.

The demands and levels of per capita consumption generated by these systems were unsustainable from the earliest days of the techno-industrial revolution that began 2½ centuries ago. Changes in human power and productive capacity made possible the exponential explosion of population from 500 million people in 1750 to more than 6 billion people in the year 2000—a 12-fold increase, with half of it occurring in the last 50 years.

The fact is that we are being hoist by our own petard. Short of comprehensively intelligent social and political behavior and exquisite transformative use of the very technological power by which we have entrapped ourselves, we will continue to ravage and destroy the Earth, consuming every last mineral deposit, oil pool, forest, fishery, arable soil, and habitat.

The implications of this conclusion are so profound—in such categories as population stabilization and decrease, massive transitions to renewable power sources and mass transit, settlement patterns, low material civilization, just and equitable social organization, and changing sovereignties amongst local, national, and world governments—that no political individual or party, anywhere, can face them.

We still deal with symptoms. In so doing we make no progress toward the fundamental reforms and transformative work that must be done, if we are to save ourselves and our close and distant kin on this Earth. Pollution-control devices without fundamental environmental reform are of the same futile order of utility as bigger prisons without fundamental social reform. They both stem from the same kind of simplistic thought: tighten the wing nuts on the pressure cooker and hope you're not around when it explodes.

To continue in this distracting and procrastinating mode guarantees that every ameliorating improvement within the current frame will be outrun and overwhelmed by the remorseless increase of human population—which, even with our best efforts, will have doubled again toward the end of the coming century. Trapped and blindly bashing on, we will continue, given the desperation of human needs, to recklessly consume the diminishing resources that measure our hopes and abilities for transformation, and the time left to do it.

Moreover, in such conditions of growing desperation and rampant social inequity, we will use our respective private and public powers—in whatever forms they evolve and combine—to battle over the scraps of material sustenance that remain.

In such a world of advancing poverty and constant struggle for evermore marginal survival, foresight and rational planning for the future will disappear.

Immediate imperatives will govern. Those imperatives will force the mobilization of all people to war and sacrifice. A common footing will be achieved under the lash of necessity and desperate, dictatorial leadership. Individual freedom along with social and environmental amenity will be early victims. Much worse will follow.



It pains me deeply to write this grim Jeremiad and impose it upon whatever hardy readership might persevere to its end. But the trivializing follies of this political season, highlighting the long-term loss of valuable time and energy needed for serious work, constrain me to it.

Within that larger context, the National Parks and equivalent preserves of the world symbolize the kinds of enlightenment and foresight so generally lacking these days. Through my association with parks over a large part of my life, I have discovered an intellectual and philosophical catalyst, a beacon that resolves to a guiding point much of the chaos and confusion and complexity that characterizes the modern world.

I see in the fate of these symbolic places larger fates.

If we cannot utilize these places, around the world, for thought and wisdom, as aids in our salvation, then, it seems to me, we have little chance to solve the more intractable kinds of problems that we face as a species. If we cannot see the enduring values of these belays on an ever-steeper cliff—save them from the instant resource, recreation, and commercial gratifications of the moment—that inability may seal our larger hopes as representatives of intelligent life. It may say that we are merely clever, that our flashes of brilliance must inevitably be overcome by the visceral heritage of our ancestry.



[Ed. note: With this essay, Bill Brown closes his “Letter from Gustavus” column, which has appeared regularly in the *FORUM* since 1992. Although Bill is now going to concentrate on other writing projects, we expect to have further contributions from him on an occasional basis.]