I'd rather live among wild animals than weird humans

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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To live in a near wild state of nature or very rural area is not a route for many urban dwellers today. But if they have no sustenance in the city someday, what happens to them? This is a question swept so far under the rug that we forget it's there at all.

Personally speaking, I feel that a beast that could be watching me or about to mess with my stuff is not so much a worry as the human one that one is all too likely to encounter. There's some bad ones out there, but they are in the cities for the most part, and not, in my experience, out in healthy nature. It's not that there aren't plenty of healthy and wonderful people in the cities -- and their more creative and selfless work may determine our survival as a species. However, a neglected aspect of survival is pristine nature and living the country life.

It's considered wrong to lure people in great numbers, or even additional numbers, to a cherished environment. Understandably so, particularly when it's someone's home. So the "Portland rated number one" finding in news media we periodically see is maybe bad news for locals not looking forward to higher rents. Hey, I didn't say which Portland, so I'm still cool. The nature area and very rural area being protected and unpublicized is a place that is too ecologically sensitive -- alive -- to withstand the modern ways and appetites of mucho mundo.

So it's not people themselves that are a threat to the world -- although their numbers are overshot past even an all-vegetarian population -- but what they may tend to do that's destructive. These days, it's often to plasticize the landscape and waters -- and their own unfortunate bodies -- or any number of errors such as warring. I further suggest that Western Civilization as a particular culture is the same as the problem of "modern ways and appetites."

It seems logical, therefore, that for an overall answer to the issue of pollution and climate change, we will have to love and uphold an ecosystem unburdened by modern ways -- enough to abandon them now or as soon as possible.

It should not have to be such an adventure of heedless, insane barbarism for a modern person to take up a natural life away from modernity and high-density populations. Yet, those who live a fairly simple life and are close enough to natural living to see fearsome predators on the prowl for lunch, well, such folk are the more sane in my book.

The city as a diseased, alluring whore

The modern city with its troubles and evils is dressed up along with its good elements as a fancy whore. The whore beckons, it offers seductions and satiation, and calls itself (through mass corporate media) the bastion of sophistication and civilization. (The reader already suspects that civilization is questionable.) The "trick" in this case is the poor slob who pays through the nose for stuff that doesn't quite make him happy or sustain him (money, material things, isolated consumerism), just as a whore does not offer his or her partner-in-trade any real substitute for a mate or family. The city, like the whore, is a temporary experience for both humanity and the trick.

To mention the weird humans: they are not only in cities, but most of the crazies in the countryside are just victims of city stuff. Violence and other rampant crime come to mind. When I was hiking above Yosemite Valley in wilderness in 1995 (I had come to give a talk and eco-music recital for the area Audubon Society chapter), I noticed that out there in wilderness people were consistently friendly and reasonable. Gosh, could it be that our mental health requires healthy nature, too?

Among serious readers of this column -- furrow your brow please -- the question of "how many people can survive the post-petroleum dawn" has everything to do with where they will live: in cities, or out in nature and rural areas? Many have given up on the suburbs, when such movies as End of Suburbia influences a significant audience. Under the imminent conditions of not nearly enough petroleum available for almost all our daily habits and vices, will we have much of an urban population left? If they remain surviving in large cities, massive human-power farming and intense use of the environment would have to be devoted to feeding and otherwise providing for the urban dwellers. How sustainable could that really be?

If, on the other other extreme, large cities become history and we go back to nature as best we can, at present we have some kind of a taboo to imagine how many humans (modern and otherwise) can subsist. Such a number is so much less popular than a run-of-the-mill baseball statistic, such that the number in question is like a bastard orphan. Yet, it may come back to haunt us as our cities collapse due to the failure of technology to truly substitute for actual resources that can renew themselves without a petroleum infrastructure.

The reliance on technology out in nature, when modern people venture into the wild, is depressingly high. Even a backpacking trip adds to the landfill (assuming we remove the refuse we brought in as packaging, for example). Whether

before the landfill or after the trash gets there, bears get into it in some places. Even more disturbing than the mess and the occasional hazard to humans is knowing that the bear tried eating a lot of packaging. Seeing the remains makes you wonder why we buy unnecessary crap.

It is alarming to some of us that we sorely lack skills in wilderness survival such as fire-making, creating shelter, finding foods, assuring access to fresh water, etc. What happens when we individually don't have enough of the answers, and we feel like a babe in the woods? Answer: community. Mutual aid. Pooling information and skills. Are you ready? This will be essential in towns too when the petroleum free-lunch disappears.

The touting of nature areas as superior dwelling spots is not much of a solution to the train wreck that the whore known as the city is about to experience. And, again, "we don't want y'all comin' around", as refugees from New Orleans found after the 2005 hurricanes. All in all, I thought it was worthwhile to assert, for everyone's good including our collective survival, that nature is where it's at. This has always been, always will be.

The city or whore that tries to substitute for nature is suffering from AIDS, figuratively if not literally, and has other crises such as vermin (corresponding perhaps to the social disease of corruption). The city always tells its population that all is normal: huge portions covered with asphalt and concrete, foul air, noise, and crazy people of various segments of society. "Tune in at 7 PM for a new report on what's hot on four wheels!" With all we know about the suffering climate and air-pollution related diseases, car culture is still an acceptable affliction on the body of Gaia, if you will. Why does this tragedy happen? Simple: profit for the few, enabled by the system's seduction of enough schmucks and tricks to enrich the whore who claims to thrill and fulfill.

True, in a city one doesn't have to worry about running water (albeit tainted city water) until we suddenly run out of it. The same can be said for electric power, or any other need or "need." But choosing to do without all the conveniences and without seeing the many interesting passersby and car drivers, et al, is something to experience -- if only so that you know where we have to return to: the garden. There could be love and peace there; you never know until you try.

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northern California

Further reading:

"I love nature so I sleep with her (Living outside the box)", Culture Change e-Letter #37, by Jan Lundberg

culturechange.org/e-letter-37.html

End of Suburbia, documentary on peak oil and New Urbanism:

endofsuburbia.com

Comment

From Patrick Mazza, of Climate Solutions, Seattle:

I'll stack up my greenhouse gas emissions living three miles from work in downtown Seattle and riding the electric trolley bus there, picking up my food at the downtown market, sometimes from a stand at Pike Place market, to those of rural dwellers living far from each other. In terms of food miles, it should be noted that the largest energy expenditure is for the bags in the car coming home from the supermarket, rather than transportation into city areas. City life offers the possibility for many interactions in a concentrated space, so minimizes the need for travel. Anti-urban bias is one of the oldest of American cultural artifacts, part of our anti-social culture. (It should be noted that the highest levels of mental illness are found in isolated rural areas and very poor inner city neighborhoods – They are comparable.) I would anticipate as oil becomes scare and more expensive, people will flock back into the cities, from the suburbs and rural areas, to take advantage of the easy access and proximity to things and other people. The green city is the future, a place increasingly served by public conveyance, powered by renewable energy generated from buildings, creating "cradle-to-cradle" materials loops that make waste a thing of the past. Whereas most of today's rural life is a product of cheap oil and rampant highway building, and will grow ever more costly to maintain.

Climate Solutions' website: climatesolutions.org

Reply from Jan Lundberg:

It is possible to live a rural life without a car, if one is determined. The post oil future will make it easy to avoid car dependence in the countryside. Although cities' density are an advantage, there's also something to be said for many rats in a cage in terms of efficiency -- the principle must factor in limits to resources which would indicate towns of much smaller population than cities today. Praising nature never goes out of style with some of us, and we'd probably appreciate much of the old anti-urban bias. Would Patrick call Henry David Thoreau anti-social? I disagree that people will flock into cities when the food is outside the cities, unless brought in somehow by the military or made locally as in soylent green. In that sense, perhaps Patrick is right that the "green city is the future." A green town, maybe.