

Surfing the Crash

Contributed by Tom Peifer
01 March 2009

Two riders were approaching, and the wind begins to howl.....

The howling winds of February visited many parts of Guanacaste, Costa Rica, with a level of damage that made you sit up and take note. One neighbor lost a temporary house. Branches and whole trees were down everywhere and green mangoes literally carpeted the yards and streets.

In the next town an elderly gent had his morning routine interrupted when the outhouse blew away from around the throne.

For me it has been a windfall of sorts. On the one hand it provides a convenient excuse to harvest all the bananas that were almost ready anyway. On the other, wherever a tree came down or a big branch snapped, there's a new space on the ground, or a bit more light that will get through the canopy. It's just a question of figuring out what to plant.

For a long time the operative assumption in scientific circles was that the abundant sun and rainfall explained the higher diversity in the lower latitudes. More recently opinion has shifted to the "shit happens more often" school of thought. Tree falls, landslides, lightning strikes and a host of other 'disruptions' generate a constantly changing mosaic of habitat types that different organisms have evolved to exploit. If you are a bird with a nest full of eggs in a giant Guanacaste that came down, the recent winds constitute a catastrophe for you as well as your 'host'. At the same time, there is a whole suite of organisms just waiting to flourish at the opportunities provided by the new 'light gap' and a sudden dose of nutrients from the decomposing organic matter. In our area many of the seeds are already there, others will be blown in or imported by animals. The process known as forest succession will launch with the first rains.

Unlike natural eco-systems which have recuperative strategies perfected over eons, systems devised by humans sometimes seem like Humpty Dumpty, a bit labor intensive on the reassembly side. Take the "perfect storm" that's whipping through global finance. The force five gusts have done substantially more than splatter a few mangoes and blow over some trees. They've blown away trillions of dollars, caused rising unemployment, homelessness, riots and actually toppled some governments. Even the Wall Street Journal has noted that people's belief in the 'system' has been profoundly shaken. "No, duh!" might be the only appropriate response from a seething citizenry which has witnessed a drastic decline in the values of their homes, retirement accounts, indeed, in their very aspirations to what used to be considered the "non negotiable American way of life."

Please forgive me for once again drawing on analogies from nature. Just two years back I commented on a book, *The Upside of Down*, (The Howler, March, 2006), in which the writer all but concludes that civilization is headed for some kind of collapse. But, he argues, much like the falling tree in the forest, a systemic collapse provides the "light", the breathing room or the space in which new approaches, forms of social organization or ways of doing business, can flourish.

A convenient example comes from the nearby country of Cuba. The collapse of the Soviet Union effectively severed their supply line of chemical inputs for farming. The country suddenly found itself in a world of hurt, but with a small cadre of weirdos who had quietly pursued organic farming all along. The success of Cuba to weather the 'special period' and roll out urban gardens, biological pest control and a whole arsenal of alternative techniques stands in stark contrast to the million or so deaths due to starvation in North Korea, another country cut off from Soviet supplies. The salient point in the case of Cuba is that the seeds of change had already sprouted. They simply needed an opening in the structural canopy that hindered their development.

'Arrested development' is an apt description for the current status of things along the Gold Coast of Guanacaste. It takes two forms. One: the project is dead in the water, weeds are covering the roads and the office staff has been reduced in direct proportion to the declining sales and investor enthusiasm. The second form is a sort of delusional state that

everything is coming back to normal in a short time. A recent on-line promotion for houses under \$500K and yacht slips up to 240' had my friend Helen and I literally doubled over with laughter. "Don't these people have a sense of reality?" she wondered. "I mean, half the world's population doesn't even have electricity, what are they thinking?" Good question, Amiga.

In point of fact, they may be thinking that the future will be like the past. That the days will return when tourists come down with a severe case of Pura Vida syndrome, go home, take out a second mortgage and come back down here and build a small castle—oh yeah--on a golf course. If you happened to catch the immediate reaction on Wall Street to Obama's plan for saving the financial Humpty Dumpty, you may agree there is increasing evidence that 'normal' won't return any time soon. It's time for a different approach. I call it: Surfing the Crash.

Thirty years ago this month, I paddled out solo to a perfect left-hander that was peeling off in front of the hotel I was working on in Gambia, West Africa. The waves had been hissing and spitting for hours in front of the restaurant where the carpenters had a temporary workshop. I was the boss, and frustrated at missing out on flawless conditions. Finally, I took a temporary leave of absence. Nearly a hundred workers filled the unfinished rooms along the bluff and watched as I raced along the fastest backside waves of my life. When I left the water after bouncing off the bottom, they looked at the board in fascination, turning it over and over. "What is it?" one asked. "It's a Channin," said another. They wanted to know where the motor was. The point is not, 'gee how stupid these guys were'. After all, I had seen the same dumbstruck, jaw-drop look on fishermen ten years earlier in Portugal the first time they saw people riding waves.

The point is that people can be observing a phenomenon, in this case, crashing waves, for up to a lifetime, and see only danger or destruction. Out of nowhere comes a guy with a different set of skills and/or tools -- but most importantly a different perspective, managing to tap into a confluence of forces unperceived -- and literally glide and cavort in the zone where others encounter only chaos and catastrophe.

People who want to prosper in the new reality, and this includes developers and business people in Guanacaste, should take a tip from experienced surfers: take a long look at the rapidly changing conditions before paddling out and committing to the drop. The good news is that there will be fewer and fewer players in the lineup. While no one knows for sure how the future winds will blow, a couple of trends seem to be a sure bet.

1. Localism rules. The seemingly endless march of globalization has gone from fast-forward to neutral and now is slipping into reverse. Manufacturing, shipping and trade have all taken a big hit and a wave of protectionism seems to be building. Agriculture is predicted to take a big hit because of credit problems affecting spring planting. Fewer chunks of foreign capital are going to be flowing through the local economies. It makes ever more sense to plug projects into both job creation and re-circulation of capital within local economies and based on local resources. A project near me started a small farm and now is planning a venue where local food—from veggies to eggs to goat cheese—will be sold. They are also planning to incorporate workers' housing into the project, at least a partial response to the dearth of land available for locals. The guy who figures out how to make alcohol locally and legally will become a millionaire.

2. Back to the basics. It is hard to imagine but Americans are discovering the forgotten practice of saving money. The 5000 sq. ft. house with 'lawyer foyer' entrance appears to be living on borrowed time. Expect shoppers down here to want fewer frills. It's about time.

Part of the allure of the tropics has always been the ultimate luxury: simple, clean, comfortable and affordable living at a pace where people can slow down enough to realize how little they need to really enjoy life. Even without the imported Italian marble and Balinese bathroom fixtures, a well located hammock is usually enough to get people relaxed and humming a few lines from an old song " You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometime, you just might find, you get what you need." Oh yeah!

Tom Peifer is an ecological land use consultant with 13 years experience in Guanacaste. Phone: 2658-8018.
peifer@racsacr.co.cr

El Centro Verde is dedicated to sustainable land use, agriculture and development.

* * * * *

Tom's previous article is titled Getting out of Dodge to the Tropics?

This article is published under Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107. See the Fair Use Notice for more information.