

Too Successful for Our Own Good

by Bill Herbst

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Here in the 21st century, humanity faces the most serious crisis of our entire history. Our species has become too successful for our own good, as well as the good of much of the rest of life on earth. That may seem perverse, but it is not. Too much of anything can become harmful. The recent, stunning success of humanity — as a species and a life-form — is definitely too much. Without intending to, we are destroying the intricate and astonishing balance of interdependent life on this planet.

Nature does not care about this imbalance, at least not in the way that human beings experience and express care. Nature will not step in to prevent the imbalance. She is not like a uniformed policeman patrolling a local, neighborhood beat, whose mere presence is designed to act, at least to some extent, as a deterrent against crime by reminding citizens that the cops are among us, on the job, and watching, and thus that breaking the law may have unwanted consequences. No, nature lets the Game of Life play out, adapting to whatever shifts and changes occur among the players. The rules usually allow balance to be restored or a new balance established after the fact, but nature doesn't intercede beforehand. She is non-preferential, neither protecting nor condemning any particular species. That's not her style of parenting.

The crisis to which I refer, of course, is ecological disruption through human activity, mainly industrial — the wholesale conversion of natural, i.e. "wild," environments into "artificial environments" exclusively for human use; the fouling through toxic pollution of soil, fresh-watersheds, rivers, and oceans; and greenhouse gas emissions (carbon, methane, and others) released into the atmosphere predominantly by the burning of fossil fuels that kick-started global warming and are pushing it into accelerated feedback loops, with the now-nearly-inevitable result of catastrophic climate change. Humans have taken over the surface of the earth, and not in a healthy way.

It took us a long time to get to this crisis point. For most of our 200,000 years, we were a threat only to ourselves and to each other. Yes, we hunted animals for food, but not in numbers sufficient to harm any particular species of wildlife. Yes, we left our garbage when we changed encampments, but what we left wasn't particularly toxic, and nature recycled all of it. Yes, we were often violent and fought amongst ourselves, but violence is part of our nature and occurs throughout the natural world.

About 12,000 years ago, humans domesticated animals for labor, shifted from small-scale gardening (horticulture) into larger-scale single-crop production (agriculture), began to build permanent settlements, and with all that started to claim dominion over land and resources through ownership. That was the beginning of civilization — larger societies beyond kinship bands, with social inequality, war, and empire, plus many other developments that might be judged wonderful or dreadful depending on one's perspective.

Over the past two centuries, humanity made a quantum leap in size and power. Our power took off as critical mass was reached in the Industrial Revolution, then again even more exponentially with the Technological Revolution. Human population grew dramatically, seemingly overnight, and with it, the scale of our activities ramped up to gargantuan proportions — industrial, economic, military, and civil. Our lust for resource extraction became ever more obsessive and driven, as well as infinitely more efficient. We told ourselves that we were the Masters of the Universe, the Crown of Creation, and that we had a God-given right to everything we took. Sadly, that has led us to the current crisis, where not only the entire ecosystem of the earth is under assault from us, but even our own future as a species is now in doubt.

I reject completely the "denialist" perspective that the crisis is false and that we can and should ignore all the many warning signs and jolly well just keep doing what we've been doing. Down that road lies madness and death, as far as I'm concerned. That said, I'm sympathetic to the view that, to at least some extent, we had good intentions and didn't set out to do harm. The problem is that, having created this juggernaut, we now seem unable to slow it down and thus prevent disaster. Humans built this runaway train, and now we can't stop it. However smart we may believe ourselves to be — and our big brains have made us undeniably clever — we're neither sufficiently wise nor mature to come up with good (meaning workable and effective) solutions upon which we can agree enough to implement.

Those who are concerned identify and accuse various culprits of responsibility for our looming dilemma. Some blame capitalism. Some accuse the elites who run civilization. Others flag overpopulation. And still others point a finger at the inherent flaws of human nature — our narcissism, greed, and short-sightedness. All these critiques have a certain ring of truth to them, but none are very satisfying as answers to why we're in the mess we're in and what we might do about it.

The overpopulation argument has certain compelling features, but I think of the dramatic rise in numbers of humans over the past two centuries as being a result more than a cause of our dilemma. In the 1980s, China implemented a One Child policy to slow its population growth, but that produced numerous unwanted side effects, such as a demographic imbalance in gender (more males than females). With 7.7 billion people alive now, current estimates forecast declining birth rates, but predictions still estimate 11 billion humans in 2100, barring any cataclysmic mass die-off.

The elites are well aware of the problem of too many mouths to feed. Some people believe that this is why those in power are not merely willing to sacrifice billions of humans to premature death, but are quite probably actively planning for it. I don't relish that thought, but the Haves are notorious for not giving a damn about the Have-Nots, so I think it's possible or even probable among think-tank planners.

Then there's the lack of wisdom angle, the idea that our basic nature has always contained the seeds of our destruction. From where I sit, it doesn't appear that wisdom or maturity are particularly relevant to species in the natural world. Maybe I'm wrong about that (as I am often wrong about so many things...). Perhaps plants are wiser than I know, and such wisdom is an essential product of photosynthesis. Animals, however, don't seem to me very wise. Wicked smart, yes, way beyond our comprehension and arrogance. Wise, however? No. Especially among the higher vertebrates, and particularly for collective humanity, wisdom and maturity don't seem to be part of the equation at all.

Among social animals, cooperation and competition are fundamental, of course, but I don't know of any species that considers at all the balance of life in terms of the greater good. That concern seems to be a recent evolutionary addition through the neocortex, and neural science has now shown us conclusively how relatively little the rational and philosophical functions count in most human motivation and behavior.

Those who are drawn to metaphysics frequently lament the low or "unevolved" levels of collective human consciousness. Some of these folks hope for a mass awakening into higher or broader awareness. Although I spent much of my life in and around "New Age" spirituality (I am, after all, an astrologer by profession), I'm not a devotee and don't regard as gospel any of the various stories and myths about cosmology. That's not to suggest that I pooh-pooh them, just that I regard them as poetic truth rather than literal truth.

Over my nearly 70 years, I've seen and read many predictions about "collective awakenings" supposedly just around the bend. Such predictions often come from within the community of astrology. My reaction to all these prognostications is nope, sorry, didn't happen. I was always skeptical about enlightenment in collective terms, but now I'm pessimistic to the point of cynicism.

Currently, I pin my dwindling hopes for saving us from ourselves on climate change mobilization — a small percentage of citizens who are organized and actively engaged (globally, nationally, and in local communities) in various forms of nonviolent civil disobedience: protests, marches, strikes, boycotts, etc.. That seems to me our best shot at consciousness-raising. Sure, I'd love to see collective humanity evolve naturally beyond our long, disturbed adolescence into a more sane and graceful maturity, but I seriously doubt that we have enough time to wait for that. As in most social revolutions, a small group of committed souls will have to bootstrap the whole group through some really heavy lifting.

All the various causes put forth for how we got ourselves into this pickle make some sense to me. For purposes of this commentary, I'll lump them all together under the more ecological heading of "*Too Successful for Our Own Good.*" That's the species-level perspective from the natural world. No expectations or judgments about what humans are, should, or shouldn't be. (I do that, but not here.) No hand-wringing about how screwed up we all are (I do that, too, but again, not in this commentary).

No, the natural point of view is value-neutral. Just like every other species of life on this garden planet, we are what we are, we do what we do, and we're not very conscious about it beyond our own immediate self-interest. Of course, most other species have simpler self-interests than humans. For lions, it's eat, sleep, mate, and guard their territory. Lions don't have bank accounts. They're not trying to obtain financing for projects. They're not concerned about retirement or health care. On the other hand, I have no idea what whales and dolphins think about. Heck, for all I know, they may be more complex and nuanced than we humans are. And saner, too.

The antonym of success — its definitional opposite — is failure. I'm not lobbying for humans to fail. What I hope is that first, we make a turn away from success as our primary drive (since it's not true that if a little is good, then more is better). Second, I'd like us to reconsider the domination that masquerades as religion's "human dominion over earth and all its baser creatures." Boy, has that gotten us into a lot of trouble or what? Third, I think we need to give up our historical tendency to interpret everything solely in terms of personal gain and human usefulness. We are *not* the measure of all things.

The world — even on this one small planet — is vast, and human beings are simply not as important as we believe. That's narcissism, and we need to let it go, heal it, or grow beyond it.

Basically, I think we're about to get a hard lesson in humility. I hope it's a lesson we can survive long enough to learn.