

# Taming Nature

by Bill Herbst

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A classic argument put forth by critics of humanity (a club to which I belong as a dues-paying, lifelong member) is that the entire project of civilization is aimed at the conquest of Nature and dead set on achieving that dubious end. It isn't just that we want to subdue Nature and make her serve us, but that at a deeper level we seem to want to eradicate everything on this planet that isn't the way we want it to be. Whether or not that argument is true is probably moot, since it's denied by the elites in charge and rejected by the general public. The very notion that we could be bound and determined to assassinate Nature flies in the face of everything humans regard as "normal" and has never gained any significant traction within society. The juggernaut of our hoped-for conquest of the natural world just rolls on, blithely ignoring any protestations to the contrary.

So, rather than taking direct aim at our disconnect from Nature with that head-on assault — which would amount to little more than pissing into the wind — let me approach the issue a bit more sideways, by discussing our oh-so-human wish not to conquer Nature, but instead merely to tame Her.

Civilization's roots — both semantic and literal — are built around the sense of being "civilized," which is to say, domesticated rather than wild, organized rather than chaotic, and predictable rather than unexpected. Some species (ants and humans come to mind as prime examples) are essentially builders of increasingly sophisticated systems (societies) that operate through regulation, repetition, and class divisions of labor and status. In our eager manipulations of reality, we seek to discover how the world works, then apply that knowledge systematically to achieve our desired ends. All of which is fine in theory, but perhaps not so great in real life. Despite the occasional eruption of chaos, whether that takes the shape of the French Revolution or the early days of Punk Rock, damn near everything humans do in society quickly becomes formulaic, routinized, and stratified, all meant to maintain continuity by preventing change.

Civilization is not wild and will never allow itself to become wild. It's not that society *shouldn't* be wild, but rather that it *can't*. The wild is necessarily within the province of Nature. That's where wildness lives, whether it's invisibly inside our own psyches or tangibly out in the physical world. The wild is the part of us that we cannot tame, and it's also the part of the external world that we must stop attempting to tame.

The Life Force on this planet is well-suited to being in part wild, meaning unpredictable and chaotic, and in part systematic, meaning organized and

repetitious. Those contradictory forces are not characteristically harmonious in their respective and simultaneous operations, but they happily co-exist. Their combined effect results in the wonders of evolution through improbable and dynamic systems of increasing complexity.

If life were only wild, consistent and ongoing self-replication could not be achieved. Everything would be too chaotic, too random, like Brownian motion of molecules. Complexity would never get a foothold. Conversely, if life were only organized, predictable, and systematic, self-replication might occur but would quickly become a dead end. Just same-old-same-old, endlessly repeated, like cranking out identical widgets forever. Thank God for flies in the ointment. Meaning (and probably consciousness itself) requires occasional disruptive mutation, and disruption is a function of the unpredictable — the wild.

OK, so we need both. Well then, how do we arrange and secure that balance? How do we protect the wild while also fostering greater civility? I don't have a comprehensive plan, but one thing I'm sure of is that how we've been trying to do this isn't working out well at all. In fact, it's killing us.

Wilderness — meaning the parts of the physical world on the surface of the earth that we humans do not inhabit — is essential for life. An adjective often used to qualify wilderness is "pristine." We use the compound term "pristine wilderness" to signify areas of the biosphere that remain untouched by and largely unknown to human beings. Many of these areas are extremely remote or inaccessible, such as the peaks of certain mountain ranges or the deepest parts of the oceans. Traditionally, such environments have been considered barren, usually because of their extreme temperatures.

Primeval forests and tropical jungles, with their sunlight and shade, lush greenery, and high humidity, seem much more likely to foster and nourish a myriad of different and interconnected life forms. They are obviously incubators for the life forms we call species. We continue to discover, however, that life can and does flourish even in the most hostile natural environments. Vents on the ocean floor that exist at pressurized depths where no sunlight reaches and through which spew hot, sulphurous gases from the earth's molten core turn out to be teeming with life. So, forests and jungles may be ideal nurseries for many kinds of organic life, but all wilderness contributes.

What doesn't foster life are man-made environments. Monoculture farming is simply not good for the biosphere. Cities and industrial sites are heavily polluted. Human shelters, from homes to skyscrapers, are designed to deny entry to most life. And what we cannot or don't try to shut out, we kill with poison. Nature's distribution of toxins throughout the earth's crust rendered most of them benign and relatively harmless, but our relentless extraction of resources serves to concentrate those poisons with devastating effects on all life, including our own.

Fish in the Pacific Ocean, once a bountiful, healthy source of protein, have been fouled by Mercury and other heavy metal poisoning. Recently, that worsened. Pacific fish are now irradiated. Radioactive waste from the Fukushima meltdown

is being dumped into the ocean. Meanwhile, agri-business food in America is a travesty. Every person in this country now has measurable levels of glyphosate in our tissues — from Monsanto's ubiquitous herbicide Roundup. Genetically-modified crops (GMOs) are increasingly common in this country's industrial farming, much more commonly than most people know. Is it any wonder that we get cancer and other auto-immune diseases, or that human fertility is on the wane?

And it's not only human fertility that is diminished. With so many people now alive on the planet, our relentless domestication of wilderness is significantly reducing the overall fertility of life on earth. Even more damningly, our obsession with evaluating everything only in terms of human utility and short-term economic gain is utter madness. The Corporatocracy once preached that *"What's good for General Motors is good for the USA."* Now it's what's good for Facebook and Amazon. Despite billions of people trying to make things better, Death Culture still runs the world, and it does so entirely for profit.

We should protect the wild, not tame it. Neoliberals say that personal greed is good, that we can individually do whatever the hell we want and the "invisible hand of the market" will make it all OK. That's nonsense, pure horseshit. What we need to do is stop trying to tame the wild in Nature while simultaneously still giving free rein to our own disturbed fantasies and compulsive drives. Instead, we should make sure that Nature has the chance to retain enough innate wildness to insure life's continuation while we work on ourselves to mature by becoming more civilized — more empathic, more compassionate, and with an enlarged perspective on what matters.

Electric cars, wind farms, and new roads or bridges won't achieve this. As long as the Green Revolution is mostly bogus public relations and focused only on external changes determined by economic imperatives, we will still be on the fast track to destruction. All of that amounts to little more than rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. In our narcissism, we may believe that we're Masters of the Universe, but we're not. We're part of the earth — one thread in the intricate web of life on this small planet. Without reconsidering our relationship to Nature and our misunderstanding of the wild, the future of humanity remains very much in doubt.

Achieving this fundamental change of consciousness will require a revolution. Odds appear to be either slim or none for that to occur from the top down. It will need to happen from the bottom up, through an upwelling that amounts to a mass uprising. Right now, we're not close to critical mass for any such action-oriented sentiment at the grassroots level. But increasingly frequent disruptions of breakdown and collapse could accelerate such a shift. When might this happen? No one can say for sure. And if that day arrives sooner or later, will we respond with grace or more madness? That remains to be seen.