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Dispelling the Illusion of Lifejackets: The First Step Toward a Healthy Earth Canoe

by Gretchen Rasmusson

“All the world is a canoe, and whether paddlers or passengers, we are all one people together in that vessel.” *Chumash proverb*

All the world is a canoe, yet too often it is easy to see the world as a *backdrop* for a canoe. The difference between the two views is enormous and inherent in each is a distinct attitude. If a canoe isn't properly cared for, it will cease to be a safe vessel for travel and it, along with its passengers, will sink. This is why canoe enthusiasts protect the life of their canoe by properly storing, transporting, rinsing, and waxing it; it's in their best interest to care for the vessel that keeps them afloat on the water. If we think of the world as a canoe, we see it as something that needs care and attention if both the canoe and its passengers are to continue their present existence.

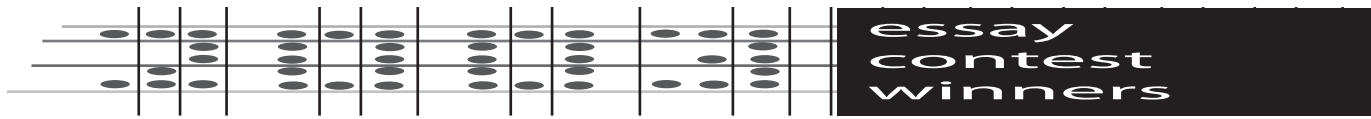
If we see the world as a backdrop for a canoe, however, human activities (like canoeing) take center stage, leaving the Earth as simply the scenery for human actions. If this is our mentality, we won't be very concerned about taking care of the Earth because it then becomes simply the backdrop and is disconnected from our actions. This pattern of thinking—easy to fall into as we go from house to car to building to garage to house, and as we work all day without seeing the sun—is dangerous. As stated in the bulletin for the June 1999 Human-Nature conference in Scotland, “There is an increasingly distant relationship between humans and the natural world. Loss of relationship can lead to abusive behaviour.”

The loss of relationship—or seeing the Earth as a backdrop for our canoe—causes humans to abuse themselves, for the Earth most definitely is a canoe, and if it sinks, it takes everything on Earth down with it. Therefore, caring for our canoe must become our first priority—more important than all other problems facing society. Our Earth canoe has been showing signs of human-inflicted wear, and the blame for global problems rests more heavily on the shoulders of wealthy industrialized nations. It is important to remember that however depressing they may appear, our problems aren't unsolvable and, interestingly enough, caring for the Earth turns out to be an all-encompassing solution, solving many other problems.

Admittedly, the analogy of the Earth as a canoe is slightly imperfect because canoes lack regenerative powers. The Earth's regenerative powers, however, aren't without limits, and these limits have been pushed. In his book *Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth*, Howard Clinebell says the Earth's “amazing regenerative capabilities . . . are already beginning to be overtaxed.” Unfortunately, humankind has placed great stress on the Earth, and it is vitally essential that it be rehabilitated. Although today's incredible technology provides a comfortable illusion of disconnection from the Earth, the truth is that humans must completely rely on the Earth. Clinebell says, “Few people are aware of how utterly dependent our lives are on being continually nurtured by nature. Every breath we take, each bite of food we eat, every drop of water we drink is a silent, usually unrecognized expression of this dependence.”

If I were to modify Clinebell's statement, I would include the phrase, “Every time we use a computer.” Although computers don't directly keep us alive, many people in industrialized nations wouldn't want to live without one. Bodily functions such as breathing, drinking, and eating are easier to link back to the Earth than computers, but it is important to remember that even mighty silicon is produced from sand. And the journey from sand to silicon is expensive to the Earth. Chris Hayhurst says, in his November 23, 2000, article in *E Magazine Currents*, that the production of the eight-inch long silicon wafer found in computers:

requires 4,267 cubic feet of bulk gases, 3,787 gallons of waste water, 27 pounds of chemicals, 29 cubic feet of hazardous gases, nine pounds of hazardous waste, and 3,023 gallons of de-ionized water. These chemicals and gases include glycol ethers, which have been identified as “serious reproductive toxins” by the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency].



Other toxic byproducts include arsenic, cyanide, phosphine, and sulphuric and nitric acids.

The Silicon Valley in California, once an agricultural paradise called “Valley of the Heart’s Delight,” is now home to twenty-nine contaminated areas designated for cleanup by the EPA (mostly thanks to the computer industry.) One of the initial red flags of this pollution was a birth defect, which was three times more prevalent in 1982. Although the companies that caused the birth defects have since met government pollutant regulations, the enormous amount of chemicals required from production remains the same and, unfortunately, computers quickly become outdated and need replacing. As Todd Smith, executive director of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, says, “Intel and Microsoft try to get consumers to buy new gadgets every fourteen months. I don’t see how that can continue. You just can’t sustain that type of development considering what it does to the environment.”

However, these electronic gadgets and their byproducts aren’t the only items heading to the trash after a short period of use. Susan Strasser says in her book *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*, “More and more things are made and sold with an understanding that they will soon be worthless or obsolete.” Styles of clothing change so quickly that an item purchased one summer is frequently out of date before the next. Everything is sold in its own individual packaging and increasing numbers of goods are sold as disposables. Each person in the United States generates an average of 4.4 pounds of solid waste per day, of which one pound is recycled. Although more recycling is taking place today than thirty years ago, more trash is also being produced and at a faster rate. It is easy to forget about the trash as soon as it is collected, but the waste we produce stays with us in the canoe.

I have mostly discussed problems in industrialized nations, with emphasis on the United States. But are environmental problems only present in rich nations? No. However, as stated by American playwright Paul Harrison, “The poor tread lightest on the Earth. The higher our income, the more resources we control and the more havoc we wreak.” Yes, there are environmental problems in poorer nations but, unfortunately, it is often the case that they are caused by powerful industrialized nations. Yet as long as the problem isn’t sitting immediately next to the big man in the canoe, it is considered insignificant or nonexistent.

In the prelude to the book *Creeping Environmental Problems and Sustainable Development in the Aral Sea Basin*, editor Michael H. Glantz says that in 1960 the Aral Sea in Central Asia was the fourth-largest inland body of water in the world. Now, only a few decades later, it has become the sixth-largest, shrinking to about half of its original size due to Soviet government decisions to irrigate the

desert soil for cotton production. This decision has had enormous ramifications, including a decrease in public health due to a high level of disease from intestinal infections and a rise in noninfectious pathology. Also, the fish industry is disappearing—fish are seldom caught there today compared to 43,430 metric tons in 1960.

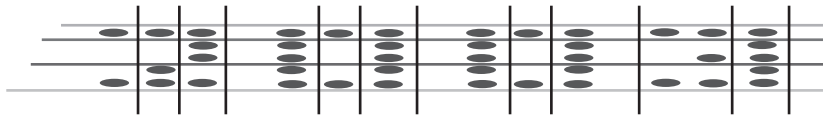
Although evidence of these negative effects was present within a decade of the project’s debut, no action was taken for yet another decade. Glantz uses the term *risk-makers* to describe decision-makers who make risks for others. For example, he says, “Reluctance to take action either to slow down or stop desertification processes threatening a village situated far from the capital city where the politicians live will likely have little, if any, direct or immediate adverse political fallout on decision-makers at the national level.” (The problem isn’t right next to them in the canoe.)

The United States also managed to further convolute the Aral Sea crisis by providing aid. According to Erika Weinthal, author of *In Focus: Central Asia: Aral Sea Problem*, the four purposes of U.S. policy in Central Asia were “democracy building, free market economics, regional cooperation, and integration into the international system.” The United States’ real interest, however, most likely involved the oil present in Central Asia, so naturally it wanted its good works to be quite visible and not shared with other nations. While attempting to form regional cooperation, the United States neglected to cooperate with other donor programs, and U.S. interests in democracy building “shifted towards economic issues.”

According to Nikita F. Glazovsky, author of “The Aral Sea Basin” in *Regions at Risk: Comparisons of Threatened Environments*, one of the promised outcomes of the irrigation process was increased employment in agriculture for the growing population in the Aral Sea region. However, the number of people working in agriculture didn’t increase, and the “share of agricultural employment has declined.” Human attempts to improve the economic situation not only failed but also hurt human health, the local ecosystem, and other industries. According to Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry in their book *The Universe Story*:

The natural world itself is the primary economic reality, the primary educator, the primary governance, the primary technologist, the primary healer, the primary presence of the sacred, the primary moral value.

In situations like the Aral Sea crisis, it seems that placing certain human interests ahead of caring for our Earth canoe has caused many other human problems in addition to hurting the Earth. But when one cares for the Earth



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canoe first, the problems that tend to make us neglect the Earth are often solved. In this case, humanity was trying to improve the economy. However, Clinebell points out that what was really necessary was an “inclusive understanding of the world that sees the economic and ecological well-being of one’s own group in the context of a healthy community, nation and world.” This means looking for the bigger picture, trying to get to the root of the issues. For example, what would happen if all the money spent on cancer research instead went toward reducing the use of chemicals such as freon, the ozone-depleter, and other probable causes of cancer? It is more efficient to attack the problem at its cause than to continually clean up the messy consequences. Attempts should definitely be made to care for those who are currently suffering from cancer, but I think those patients would agree that the majority of our energy should be spent working to address the source.

Another human problem that caring for the Earth helps solve is war. Although the Cold War has ended, there is still a threat of nuclear war, detrimental to both the environment and peacemaking efforts. Also, there is a serious risk of biological warfare absolutely devastating to the biosphere. Clinebell says there is a great amount of “interdependence of ecological and peace issues.” Caring for the Earth can also help alleviate religious and spiritual wars as all faiths peacefully unite on common ground to discuss the goal of healing the planet, paving the way for conversations concerning other issues.

In addition to religious violence, caring for the Earth can reduce other forms of oppression. Clinebell says, “Ecoviolence against the Earth is interrelated with other types of human violence.” If one works to stop oppressing the Earth, the motivation to cease oppressing other people should follow. For in responsibly caring for the Earth and becoming educated about its problems, humanity will recognize that everyone is alike in the fact that they live on Earth and are nurtured by it. Differences in sex, race, or income lose their importance upon the realization that humanity’s future existence is at stake.

Personal attitudes and understanding can also be improved by time constructively spent in nature. Clinebell writes, “Earth bonding and people bonding are complementary needs that, when satisfied, are mutually reinforcing.” Does this mean that nature is always peaceful and beautiful, giving people a sense of happiness and serenity? No. There are squalls, storms, droughts, and hurricanes. There are times when the Earth is frozen and barren, and times when it is unbearably scorching and parched. How does nature’s dark side improve human attitudes? Well, nature can be healing when it is viewed as a reflection of human life. Just as nature cycles itself through times of

darkness and light, so do individual human lives. Birth and death are present in both. Clinebell says, “Human life, like the natural world of which we are an integral part, includes suffering and struggle and eventual death. But, as nature illustrates so dramatically, the pain is wonderfully intermingled with joy, and suffering with celebration of the good gift of being alive.” Healing happens in the bad times as well as in the good. Some seeds grow only after being burned. According to Margaret Meade:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

There are no lifejackets in the canoe, and it is clear that there is the danger of capsizing. All of the ecological problems can create a feeling of helplessness. But the situation isn’t hopeless: capsizing isn’t inevitable. James Gustave Speth, dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, stated in an address to students, “The last thing anyone should do is think that these are unsolvable problems.” Realizing that we are completely dependent on our ailing Earth is the first step toward solving environmental problems and, as a side effect, solving human problems. It is possible to be realistically hopeful about the future of the Earth. Keeping our dependence in mind in spite of modern technology’s amazing capabilities can motivate us to care for the Earth and attack human problems with Earth-centered solutions.

Although there are no lifejackets aboard the slightly warped Earth canoe, it is important to approach the situation with love, hope, and even laughter. Fear and guilt should play a small part in prompting ecological change. Clinebell concludes:

Feeling a loving connection with nature can energize motivation to respond by nurturing the Earth more caringly. . . . The more desperate a situation is, the more important it is for people to have frequent mini-vacations of laughing with others and laughing at the absurdities in the situation.

The situation isn’t hopeless, and our children’s children will thank us tomorrow for preserving their home today.

Gretchen Rasmusson of St. Paul, Minnesota, is twenty-three years old. This essay placed first in the eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old age category of the 2003 Humanist Essay Contest for Young Women and Men of North America.