

What I'm On About!

The Short Version.

The rapidly mounting threats to the future of life on Earth have led me to spend years fighting to publish and distribute my nature photography in the brutally tough Canadian greeting card market. Really. In case the link between cards and survival isn't immediately obvious, it goes like this...

Despite the difficulty of focusing on it amid the press of other concerns, our planet's astoundingly complex and wondrous ecosystem is buckling from the strain of supporting humanity.

To grasp this incredible truth, as we surely must, we have to look past the lines on the maps and see our combined, global impact. Then, in order to turn international exploitation and posturing into cohesive positive action, we have to recognize that we all belong to one global community and, accordingly, accept our shared duty for the well-being of the world. At the same time, we still have to nurture our bonds to our own place on the planet; to our countries, our communities and our land. So that our love of home, our gut feelings for our piece of Earth will make what is at stake for everyone real to us.

So that we're moved to act, now.

Because reacting late to this crisis just won't cut it.

Some messes are way too big to be cleaned up.

Since the late 80's my greeting card line, *Visible Changes*, has been the basis of my efforts to help the situation. Cards are a nice practical way get out pictures that can arouse and affirm the feelings urban people have for nature. Feelings that I hope will influence their actions for the better. I've wed these images of Canada to the wisdom of China's ancient nature based oracle, the *I Ching*, to show how timeless human themes link all cultures. Because I want Canadians from all regions to feel proprietary of the whole country, the text is in both English and French. (As sales grow, the cards will also be able to help provide funding for other ecological efforts.)

Mail from across the continent confirms that the cards do affect people as hoped. Sadly, the exclusive deals that two huge multinationals have with most card carrying retail chains in Canada make distribution very challenging. Happily, we are slowly but surely convincing buyers (those who need it) that good Canadian cards conveying the spirit and beauty of our land should have a fair chance alongside the foreign cards.

I did not expect my fight for Earth to include a prolonged battle against globalization in the greeting card market. Alas, it's becoming clear that the front lines run through our homes and workplaces just as surely as through the imperilled land.

The Long Version.

Check out the population graph that frames this page. For 200,000 years, there were under a million people on Earth. Then we began farming and by 8000 BC we reached 5 million. By 3500 BC, 10 million. By 500 BC, 100 million. In 1500 AD, we hit 500 million. A scant 300 years later, we topped a billion. And the billions began piling up. Lately, one every 12-15 years.

If this doesn't alarm you, you probably haven't seen what happens when a species' population explodes. I've seen it play out twice; first with rabbits, then beaver. It isn't pretty.

I had the rare good fortune to grow up wild. Well, at least as wild as any North American kid could hope for. At nine, I awoke from two weeks of equine encephalitic delirium to find that the big move out to our farm had finally happened. It was down a narrow dirt road, with no power, no phone, no running water, no people except us for fifty square kms... We had slipped out of step with the modern world.

It would soon be normal to know every person that I saw. To not see a car for days. To go to a one room school, then return home to solitary play and good hard work: in the fields or tending the animals. To harvest vegetables for canning and storage in the root cellar. To get milk, eggs and meat from our own cow, chickens and pigs. To spend hours cranking things: the separator to get rich golden cream from the raw milk, the churn to make butter, and the ice cream maker, on occasion, to make the best ice cream I've ever tasted. And to while away long winter nights around the glow of a kerosene lamp, playing cards and telling stories, cozy from the warmth of three wood stoves, even at -55° Celsius.

A shy, thin bookish boy to start, I'd grow strong, competent and confident. At ten, I'd learn to drive, and would soon be using all kinds of machines. The same year, I'd get my first gun, a .22 rifle, and begin bringing home partridge for supper. For fun, I'd teach myself to quick draw a pistol, shoot a bow, and throw a knife, spear and axe. I'd also find the art in working with that axe, a shovel, pitch fork and sledge hammer. And find the joy of breaking a sweat and working hard for hours. Like an uncaged animal, I'd run everywhere. Best of all, with the horses in their huge pasture—to catch them for riding or just to play. They love to race. No one beats a horse on open ground but, eventually, I could outrun them through the woods.

As life changing as all this would be—as priceless as the cultural, technological and historical objectivity that it gave me remains—a more profound change would take place. The locus of my perception would shift; from the man-made systems that I'd always known, to the natural world that they depend upon.

I had left the hospital as vulnerable as a chick fresh from the egg. My fever bruised mind had let go of the filters that allow us to make sense of the cacophony of city life, by blocking all but the “significant” sights, sounds and smells. Wide open and hurting, I found solace in the still dominant forest, where such sensory governors are unneeded. It wasn't silent, but quieter.

Not still, but slower. The sounds and sights of the wind playing through the trees, the birds calling and swooping, the buzz of insects, the warm sun on my skin, the smells of the earth—it was all of a piece. It was just right. It came whole into my mind, and encompassed me. I re-imprinted, on nature. I was home.

Alone, I wandered the forest, through cowboy boot summers and moccasin winters. I found an ancient clearing... where time stood still. I howled with the coyotes, under a river of stars. Stealthy, still as a stone, I watched the wild creatures go about their lives.

The winter that the rabbits topped out, they soon exhausted their normal foods. They turned to tree bark, then to the wood itself. In their desperate need they killed countless young trees, but to no avail. Come spring, the ground was littered with their bony white bodies.

With the beaver it was even sadder because I'd watched them for years, playing so tenderly with their young, and working so hard—building their damn higher and adding more lodges. Then, one year, there weren't enough trees left to store under the ice for winter food. Come spring, of the 30 or more healthy beaver at freeze up, only two gaunt adults circled the quiet pond.

So, in light of our growth rate, I'd give up hope if I didn't believe that we *can* be smarter than your average rodent. Yes, we do have a grim list of unavowed disasters like Easter Island; where the locals cut down every last tree, then starved to death when they couldn't make more fishing boats. But, I still maintain that we can face the facts, and make the changes that we must to survive.

The facts we must face are...

- We've consumed over a third of Earth's resources in the last 30 years. The minority of us with most of the wealth take the lion's share, and plan to help the billions of poor by selling them on our gluttonous lifestyle.
- We meet our irrigation, industrial and domestic water needs by using more than half of Earth's fresh surface water, and by draining her vast underground aquifers faster than they can replenish. The capacity of the aquifers, which originally held 97% of Earth's fresh water, is being permanently reduced by sediment compaction caused by their dropping levels. Half of the people on Earth will be short of water in 25 years
- We're leaching all kinds of pollutants, including cancer causing chemicals, into the aquifers. They have a 1,400 year flushing cycle so it will take 50 generations for people in many areas get a clean drink of water.
- We have taken over or ruined 40% of Earth's productive land, leaving millions of other land based species a rapidly shrinking 60%. In theory, we could junk the rest of creation, use all the land, and feed 2-3 times as many people as now. >>

HUMAN POPULATION GROWTH OVER THE LAST 10,000 YEARS, IN BILLIONS



In reality, the network of natural systems that support life on this beautiful planet will fail long before then.

- We cause the erosion of 27 billion tons of topsoil per year through deforestation and bad farming methods. Picture a six billion km long freight train, loaded with our best soil, rushing straight into the sea. Almost 25% of it comes from the vast plains of North America, the source of 3/4 of the world's grain shipments.
- We're jeopardizing almost half of our irrigated land, the source of a third of our food. Irrigation is building up too much salt in the soil and, ironically, waterlogging it.
- We're stripping the land of vegetation so completely that another 100 sq. kms becomes desert each day.
- We destroy about 10 sq. kms of rainforest per hour. Half of Earth's original forest cover is gone; either cut down or burned. Another 30% is fragmented or degraded in some other way.
- We're upsetting Earth's natural chemical balance by significantly altering the amounts of basic elements and adding thousands of man-made compounds. We blithely do so without knowing the effects of any of these changes.
- We're on track to double levels of CO₂, the principal greenhouse gas. With its content up by a third now, to levels unseen for 20 million years, glaciers are already melting worldwide. Greenland's ice sheet is pouring into the ocean at the rate of the Nile. It alone will raise seas seven meters, inundating farmlands and wetlands, flooding out millions of people. The changes are already dramatic at the poles. In the summer of 2000, for the first time in our history, we saw open water at the north pole. By 2050, for the first time in 50 million years, all the summer pack ice will be gone, as will the permafrost. Woe unto the Polar Bears. The Musk Ox? (Santa Claus?) As this cold water displaces the current warming Europe, some of our best kept farmland will produce less. Other currents are already going wonky, further stressing fish and, along with the extra energy in the atmosphere, raising hell with the weather. Expect more killer heat waves, longer droughts and bigger, more frequent storms; ice, snow and hurricanes. In a cruel irony, two of Earth's best CO₂ sinks will be hit hard. The forests, already releasing 30% of annual CO₂ emissions thanks to agricultural burning, will burn more, and suffer greater storm and pest damage. Coral reefs, home to 65% of fish species, which were already smothering in silt from erosion are now being killed by the hotter water.
- We are now responsible for half of the planet's nitrogen fixing activity—the process of converting nitrogen gas to a solid for plant use. The balancing process of returning excess nitrates

to a gas lags well behind. It doesn't make money so it gets no help from us. These nitrates, linked to breast cancer, are among the crap finding it's way into the aquifers. They are also harmful when they reach open water instead. The effects include huge algae blooms that suffocate aquatic life and make shellfish toxic.

- We're exposing every creature on Earth to a rash of chemicals; some carcinogens, some, well, who knows what. There are about 500 chemicals in you right now that didn't even exist 80 years ago. Allergies and respiratory ailments are on the rise. Our daughters are ovulating sooner. Sperm counts are down by 50%...
 - We've damaged the ozone layer with CFC's, increasingly subjecting all life to harmful solar radiation. Until just a few years ago, I didn't know what a sunburn felt like. I certainly do now!
 - We've carted bugs, birds, animals, fish, plants—you name it—all over the globe, with devastating effects on local species and bioregional integrity. Over 20% of continental species are 'introduced' and on some islands more than 50% are. About 3000 marine species are on the move in the ballast water of ships as you read this. Now, we're casually adding new genetically engineered wild cards into the mix.
 - We have managed to reverse a 3.5 billion year trend to ever greater diversity in nature. Current extinction rates, 1000 times greater than normal, exceed those during the dinosaur's die off. While the decline of showcase species like Pandas, Rhinos, Gorillas, Whales and Tigers stirs our hearts, some lesser known species—a flower, an insect, maybe a frog—slips into the eternal night every hour. In a 1998 survey, 70% of biologists agreed that a mass extinction is under way, and that we could lose 20% of all living species over the next 30 years.
 - We've already exterminated about 20% of the bird species, pushed 2/3's of the major fish stocks to the edge of viability, or past it, and begun working down the marine food chain.
 - We hesitate to let go of nuclear bombs, in spite of having enough to destroy Earth many times over. And we store nuclear waste products in containers that can't last as long as the deadly radiation inside them. A little gift for our great grandchildren.
- If Earth's 4.6 billion years are compressed into 46 years, then homo sapiens have only walked this land for one day.** We've wrought most of this havoc in the last minute, as we industrialized, and our population shot from one billion to six. In the next 15 seconds, our numbers could grow another 50%. For the first time, a single thread in this glorious tapestry of creation wields the power to rip it to shreds... or keep it whole.

The more people there are, the more precarious life becomes. The pace that high birth rates in poor nations decrease to match those in wealthy nations will determine if we top out closer to 7 billion people, or 12. Fortunately, we know what works to bring down birth rates. It isn't slick publicity campaigns trumpeting information about the desperate state of the world and the need to have less babies. It's reliable access to food, shelter, education and family planning. 1 in 5 people live in absolute poverty; malnourished and uneducated. Their ignorance is perpetuated by illiteracy and little or no access to radio or TV, much less a computer. Around half are kids under 15. They could all be fed and educated with the 0.7% of GDP that the rich nations committed to give for development aid in 1970, but still don't. Canada, giving about .3%, is typical. The US, at .1%, gives the least. Four days of global military spending could feed the poor for a year... However we do it, it does fall to the 20% of us with the information, the infrastructure and 89% of the wealth to help these folks out. By doing so, we can save 12-15 million people each year, and lighten the burdens of hopelessness, hate, and conflict. Our future hangs on a basic truth: the welfare of Earth is intertwined with the welfare of all her people. We must guard both well during the decades that it will take us to return to a more healthy population level.

We face a trial with stakes beyond our ancestors' ken. We must fight the age-old conditioning, to doggedly carry on despite dangers and hardship, that helped them. Getting by without some berries lost to an early frost or finishing a kill with a gash in your leg is a far cry from single-mindedly working to get ahead while your planet is in jeopardy. Thinking global warming could be just the thing to fend off the next ice age, and betting on a string of such miracles to protect Earth from our excesses and inaction is delusional. We can't just carry on. We have to adjust.

It's time to radically change our relationship with nature; to see things from nature's point of view. This can be hard to do from within a city. After I left town, my cousins' visits revealed a growing rift between us. Drunk with space and freedom, playing out media fed ideas of the country, they ran roughshod over nature rather than being absorbed into it. Oh, I know the land's magic put sparkle in their adventures and graced the lulls between activities but, mostly, they were too fast and noisy to hear its wild heart.

By 13, as I watched the bulldozers carve giant checkerboards out of the tattered edge of the wilderness, I realized that the land use plans behind the domestication of these precious free places were being made in far off cities. Made by people with less feeling for nature than those rowdy boys. Those urbanites' self-serving ignorance of nature scared me. Over 30 years later, it still does.

The first step toward change, with screen time 3 to 1 over outdoor time—amidst buildings, streets and machines—is to humbly accept our disconnect from nature. In Toronto, a friend of mine was overawed by some tall cedar trees. "I thought cedar was a hedge!" she cried. The vestiges of nature found in cities are like a few words remembered from an immigrant grandparents' tongue. They can give comfort and evoke sentimental feelings, but they only hint at the full reality of our obscured heritage. We may see the moon, but never walk by moonlight... never feel the feathery touch of its rays on a cool, still night.

The second step is to begin reconnecting with the land. Slow down. Listen. Take walks in the quiet of early morning. Watch the sun rise. Join the growing crop of organic gardeners. Banish the phone and TV for the weekend. Get out of town...

The third is to pay attention to those who know the land well. After all, they're are trying to save our butts. They see that Earth's many parts make up a living whole, as do our organs and cells, and that our relationship to nature is now cancerous, rather than symbiotic. The rampant growth of human systems—farms, cities, industries, etc—is consuming and degrading nature's parts faster than they can regenerate. As toxin levels and stresses on vital systems increase, the collapse of the entire ecosystem looms.

Neither our media nor our own senses tell us enough about nature's condition; they mainly report on human conditions. We have to snap out of the illusion this creates; that, because we're progressing through our economic, technological and societal ups and downs as usual, things are more or less okay. They aren't!

To preserve nature, ourselves and our creations, we badly need the expertise and knowledge of the dedicated folks studying nature and our effects on it. There are many good people doing great work and we should be very thankful for them. Too often, they are underfunded, shorthanded, and ignored. Sometimes they're even maligned—to advance others' shortsighted goals. It's time to support them, listen to what they have to say, and act on it.

Step four is to see how Canada's vast landscape skews our perception. There are 44 people for every square kilometre on Earth, even the uninhabitable wastelands. By 2050, we'll hit 66 people per sq km. Around 2035, the rising population density of China will meet the falling density of Europe & Japan, at 145± ppsk. Today, 46 nations exceed 200 ppsk. 13 of them are above 500. Canada has 3 ppsk... *We are living in a fantasy.* Globally, most places last had this much room about 750 years ago.

No where else do so few people share so much good land. Despite our penchant for crowding into fragile shoreline areas, our staggering consumption rates and our major resource exports, a drive out of the city still evokes a sense of the endless frontier. Such feelings are completely at odds with the planet's real situation. Let's be mindful that this land is an ever more rare treasure. By knowing, loving and protecting this place, we do the whole world a service, and we may even find the essence of the word 'native'.

Step five is to see how the United States' vast economy skews our perception. It exemplifies the erosion of common sense by consumerism. In rich countries we're intoxicated by the fact that by selling lots of stuff we get cash to buy lots more stuff. So, we plunder our own resources and go to inhumane lengths to secure other people's. Like the economic colonization of poor nations; where we lend them money to buy goods, then coerce them to plunder their land for us to service the unpayable debts.

Canada's resources have long been coveted by the world's financial giants, especially those to our south, where they profit from the world's heaviest ecological footprint and the fastest growing population among the rich nations. After fomenting several military attempts that failed to annex us, they led the charge of foreigners buying up our corporations, especially in the resource sector. They also lobbied for a century to get the trade deal they now have which puts their resource needs before ours. US firms now make a tidy profit sending our resources home while we, like small time pushers, seem thrilled to be selling to a bigger user to help us pay for our own consumption habits.

The excesses common in the US make our extremely high resource use seem normal. It's not! Our 31 million people consume as much as 500 million in China. Meeting our demands *and* the US's is folly. Renewable resource use must conform to natural growth rates. Nonrenewables must be used sparingly, in case we can't find replacements. For instance, with only 40 or so years of oil left, we want to be sure it will see us through our transition to safer energy sources. Reducing exports can conserve our supply and may hasten US efforts in their inevitable energy transition.

The sixth step is to accept that in an age of mass marketing and mass consumption, our so-called individual actions are really collective, and have huge impacts. Would-be outdoorsy folks buying unneeded SUV's account for 1 in 4 new vehicle sales. Along with the buyers of unnecessary pickups and vans, they've driven the light truck category from a practical 20% of sales in 1980, up to 50%. This carbon spewing truck mania is offsetting 30 years of gas mileage gains. Let's smarten up.

Naturally, our purchasing choices *can* have equally positive effects. For example, organic farming is already growing at 30% per year. Enough customer support can transform our farming practices; improving soil conditions around the world, reducing erosion and cutting pesticide and fertilizer contamination.

Step seven is to ask why we can't meet our basic needs in less hours per week than a baboon. Despite our technical advances, we now work about twice the hours that people did 40 years ago. In the 1970's, we were told to expect a three day work week. Now, we dream of time at home to raise our own kids. Time to care for ourselves, for our families and our communities; enriching life and helping prevent problems and heartaches down the road. We need more time to relax; time to read, to listen to music, to go dancing, and to follow our own interests. And, time to be outside in nature; to learn about it, to reflect on it, and act accordingly. Where did our time go?

Urban sprawl gobbles up some. We all do a lot more driving. Consumerism eats a lot of it. The ads chant *bigger, better, faster* and we know it's crap but still work longer for a growing list of 'basic needs'. That said, the ultra-rich take the most of our time. Regulations and taxes have steadily gone in their favour since the early 80's—when they won enough people over to the theory that, if they had more money, they'd make lots for everyone.

Indeed, there *is* more wealth than ever now, and we celebrate the shiny new dynasties as proof that we can all strike it rich. But... the reality is, most wealth is still held by the same families and firms that long ago tied up North America's best assets. The richest 5% now hold a greater percentage of total wealth than they have since 1929—just before the economy collapsed for a decade. Not since back in those dark days have the rest of us gotten such a small share of the profit from our labours.

If we want to have the time and energy to do what's best for us and what must be done for the world, we will have to redress the economic balance within nations, and between them.

Step eight is to find all the qwerty things around us, and fix them. If you type, you probably use the 'qwerty' keyboard layout. It was purposely designed to slow down typists so they didn't jam the early typewriters. Dvorak, a faster, easier to use layout was designed in the 30's, but it has yet to break through our wall of habit. Try it. A few hours, and you'll never look back. (You can usually find Dvorak in the keyboard options on your computer. There are links to info and exercises at my site.)

Such qwertyisms infest our institutions, our industries and our own lives. Some of them are downright pathological, like using chemicals until proven harmful, rather than when proven safe, or leaving ecological costs out of our economic models, or fighting against birth control. We have to look anew at how we do things, especially in regard to our effects on nature. Let's find ways that work better, whether that means learning new methods, or turning back to good ones that have fallen into disuse.

The ninth step is to recognize the value of good art. Congratulate yourself if you create art, distribute art or sell art. Artists stimulate minds, build culture and community, and inform us. A thousand learned reports may fall on deaf ears, but art, infused with the same knowledge, may move millions. By building markets for art, distributors make it possible for good local artwork to fulfill its potential. And, by supporting our local artists, retailers make it possible for people to see art that is reflective of their place and their lives, instead of the usual, one-size-fits-all, megacorp offerings.

Enjoying art—like creating it, like meditation, like loving—engages the underused right side of our brain. It puts the linear, rational pursuits of the left side into a broader context, allowing understanding and appreciation that may elude logic. Receptive minds, sensitive to beauty, are more able to relate to nature.

Step ten is to know all this today, and not forget it tomorrow. Feel how much depends on the health of this vulnerable planet, and hold fast to that. Feel the urgency of the need for action. We're into the end game now. Our challenge is nothing less than to find it in ourselves to save a world. With every passing hour, living treasures are lost forever, and the job grows harder. We should have long since been on a war footing; regulating resource use, retooling industries, and investing brains and money into the search for solutions—say, more than we sink into research and advertising for the things that are killing us. Embrace the reality that action can not wait another decade. It can't wait until things get bad enough to penetrate the economic insulation of the powerful minority who profit most from this destruction.

Taking action now and knowing that we act in the company of others who care as we do is the way to remember all of the insanity without being overwhelmed by it. So, become informed. Speak up. Write letters. Go to rallies to support good causes. Keep the heat on the political and business elite. Shop smart. Conserve energy. Reuse and recycle as much as possible. Let's imagine a better world, and do our part to help create it. ♦

Main sources: World Watch Institute, World Wildlife Fund, World Wide Fund for Nature, State of The World 2001, United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, Global Policy Forum, Environmental News Network, Oxfam, Unicef, Bread for the World, Statistics Canada, "The Fight For Canada" David Orchard, "When Corporations Rule The World" David C. Korten, "The Population Explosion" Paul and Anne Ehlich, "Biodiversity and Conservation" Peter J. Bryant, thinkquest.org, www.peopleandplanet.net Sept. 2001

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Contact: Terry McTavish, contact@pendragonprints.com, 604.298.4425, 4412 Albert St, Burnaby, BC V5C 2G2.

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This essay was originally researched and written in 2001. Since then some things are getting better, and others are getting worse. Overall, we are still in very big trouble and failing to change as quickly as we should. It remains vital that we keep in mind that all of our other concerns, no matter how dramatic or expensive, are moot if we do not fully address the problems that we have beset our planet with. There are a lot of good groups out there working on a host of issues. They would be very happy to receive your help in whatever form you can give it. Thank you for your attention. We can and must make a difference.