

The End Game for a Truly Planetary Society

Geoffrey Holland

August 14, 2018

A thoughtful examination of human history boils down, more or less, to two steps forward, one step back. Our next step must be in a different direction if we intend to avoid biospheric collapse.

No written record of our beginnings exists. For most of our history, we humans lived in small, clan-like groups, roaming the landscape, hunting and gathering what we needed to survive. We got our start in Africa as a distinct species several hundred thousand years ago. Over the ensuing millennia, humans migrated and occupied much of the planet, evolving in the process into ethnicities adapted to survive with the regional climate and survival opportunities that shaped their existence.

The era of recorded history began about 5,000 years ago. Since those early times, when the total number of humans on Earth was perhaps 10 million, we have pushed through a succession of global scale transitions and become increasingly sophisticated...expanding our understanding of how the world works and developing technologies that have impacted our lives in profound ways.

We've endured many bumps along the way caused by famine, disease, or violent conflict. Despite the setbacks, overall, we humans have been very successful in adapting to and exploiting new opportunities.

In fact, we've been so successful as a species that our population has exploded to 7.6 billion, **that's billion with a b...** double what it was only 50 years ago. By the end of this century, the human population could be 10-12 billion¹.

The problem is the Earth isn't getting any larger. Neither is the planet's store of essential resources. At this moment, a billion people have little or no access to clean water or adequate sanitation. We are stripping the life from our oceans, exhausting our precious topsoils, clear cutting our forests, and poisoning Earth's living biosphere with toxic pollution. A recent study published by the National Academy of Sciences² states that while humans constitute only 0.01% of the planet's biomass, we have annihilated 83% of all wild animals and 50% of all plants in

¹ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2017). World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision, <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/>

² National Academy of Sciences. (2018). The Biomass Distribution on Earth, <http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2018/05/15/1711842115>

terms of biomass. Of the avian biomass remaining on Earth, poultry raised for human consumption constitutes 70%. Of all the mammalian biomass remaining, livestock comprises 60%, humans 36%, with only 4% being wild species. The biomass of marine mammal populations have dropped 80%. The world's ocean fisheries have been largely exhausted by commercial fishing.

"The human juggernaut is permanently eroding Earth's ancient biosphere."

E.O. Wilson, Emiratis Professor of Biology, Harvard University

Much of the excessive exploitation has taken place in just the last 50 years, coinciding with the explosion in human numbers. To a substantial degree, we have largely stripped away the diversity and the resiliency required to sustain a healthy planetary biosphere.

Quite simply, we are guilty of civilization scale overreach. Every passing day the situation gets worse. The scientific consensus is clear. Mindless exploitation and profiteering have pushed the planet's living systems to the breaking point. The course we are on is a dead end and a certain prescription for biospheric collapse.

The good news is there is still time for a course correction. It will not be easy. It will require a civilization scale response. But we can still save ourselves from ourselves.

The path to a future that is sustainable and life-affirming will be built on a profound reshaping of the way we humans organize ourselves. Exactly what that remaking will look like would be an educated guess at this point. Better to focus on two foundational principles that would have to be at the core of any kind of transcendent planetary culture that is worthy of our species.

The first organizing principle is the idea that dignity is a human right. All humans, without exception, would be planetary citizens. All would be entitled to dignity. Government would be mandated to assure that every person would have enough food, water, shelter, and peace of mind to maintain at least a modest level of personal dignity. To that, I would add access to affordable health care and education.

With dignity comes responsibility. The second organizing principle is that an enlightened society prioritizes the protection of the living biosphere we all depend on. Every human must share in that responsibility. Here's what that means in practical terms...

Our planet is already overpopulated with humans. We have to figure out how to thoughtfully draw down our numbers. It begins with universal reproductive choice and access to contraception. If we don't get a collective grip on our fertility soon, we will most assuredly

exhaust our planet's ability to provide. Before that happens, nature could well impose its own harsh brand of corrective action.

Without question, humanity is currently on a regressive path. We must come to terms with our mindless excesses, and embrace a sense of shared responsibility. If we do that, the details of building a truly sustainable planetary society will unfold over the coming decades.

The way to avoid the worst from happening is to treat every citizen with dignity and make every citizen responsible for taking proper care of the only planetary home we have. That's a tall order, but there really is no good alternative.

"Our species needs, and deserves, a citizenry with minds wide awake and a basic understanding of how the world works" Carl Sagan, Astrophysicist, Author

Geoffrey Holland is a Portland, Oregon based writer/producer, and principal author of [The Hydrogen Age](#), Gibbs-Smith Publishing, 2007