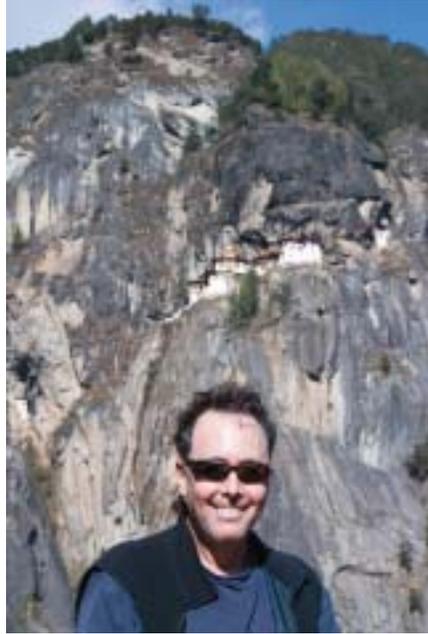


# In the Days Ahead

Biodiversity conservation, animal rights, deep ecology, ethical vegetarianism, and global sustainability are some of the concerns that need to be activated so that all life forms may live together in harmony.

By Dr. Michael Tobias



Photo/Jane Morrison

*Dr. Tobias in Bhutan*

**N**othing so becomes a civilization as its love affair with what is generally called “nature.” In classical Greek, the love of nature was termed *physiolatry*, whose ripple effects were everywhere in Greek life and philosophy, from Thales’ worship of water, to Aristotle’s sophisticated biological studies, with their emphasis on human happiness. A more recent incarnation of this sensibility emerged under the scientific guise of *biophilia*, that universal impulse, discernible in all species, which craves affiliation with other life forms. When a gorilla named Koko fell in love with a kitten, or two tsunami refugees on a beach in Somalia — one an old, wise turtle, the other, a young hippo — became best friends, that, too, is biophilia.

Biodiversity conservation, animal rights, deep ecology, ethical vegetarianism, global sustainability ... these are points of the same compass that elevate all life forms into a choreography that either succeeds, perpetuating biology in a quiet, blue corner of the Milky Way, or fails, condemning trillions of dreaming, aspiring, breathing individuals to torment and oblivion. The stakes, therefore, are enormous. Not only life, or death, but the terrible pain that accompanies failed experiments.

No other experiment has so challenged human beings as their ability, or not, to sustain life in the greater picture at all costs. By that mandate we have not been granted any unusual dispensation: every participant in evolution is equal. But the shadow cast by Helm’s Butterfly, or Fiji’s critically endangered red-throated parakeet, will not come anywhere near the grim pattern of destruction unleashed by us

humans. That this has become law, a self-evident cliché in an age of ecological Armageddon only escalates the tragedy that accompanies our ho-hum protests and mundane psychoanalyses. Scientists, theologians, those of us struggling between doubt, despair, and indifference, must convene with renewed vigor to remind ourselves of the promise we made when we were born. That contract with nature is the gift we have been granted, without which our fleeting moment on Earth is nothing more than the accumulation of dust philosophers have long labeled as destiny. It need not be.

In the heart of this ancient web of biophilia exists the simple lessons of non-violence, respect, dignity, and unconditional love. Their translations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century invoke a focused embrace of restraint, and selfless service, as Gandhi described his own callings.

These are broad strokes, of course. But in the details are basic, urgent necessities that involve, among other things, international family planning at a systematic level to combat a systemic disease, namely, our runaway population explosion. No other species has ever gone so far out of balance as *Homo sapiens*. The reasons are inexplicable given the myriad death knells associated with our transparently deceptive biological success as a species. As I outlined years ago in my book and film, "World War III," our billions of comrades do not make for any blue ribbons. Indeed, if current fertility trends continue our species is likely to attain the staggering number of 10 or 11 billion by the end of this century, despite more moderate assessments by the World Bank and United Nations.

## **But what is clear is the fuel responsible for this conflagration, and that is human numbers, our consumptive fanaticism, and the greed that has tainted the human heart.**

At 11 billion I doubt human beings will be recognizable. For centuries our true identities have been biologically obscured by the heavy handedness we today read in the form of Holocausts, serial killing, and the global rampage responsible for the loss of more than 50 percent of all photosynthetic land cover, as well as the destruction of most known marine groups. The numbers, which are bandied about like ping pongs, attest to our flailing in the face of self-destruction. But what is clear is the fuel responsible for this conflagration, and that is human numbers, our consumptive fanaticism, and the greed that has tainted the human heart. These are not condemnations, as such, but self-analysis. We are all one, which underscores the reality of what, in Jain tradition is described as "parasparopagraho jivanam," the

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interdependence of the human soul with all other life forms.

That said, we need not just manifest individual blueprints to get there, but also must configure a veritable *parliament of souls* whose unambiguous authority stems not necessarily from expediency, pragmatism, compromise, or negotiation, but from human goodness. That is a sentiment that has long been driven underground by presumptions about human nature that are probably erroneous, much like the mythology of gun-slinging cowboys and oil billionaires. Their mandates were not, are not, human goodness. Nor were these driven mavericks, aka captains of industry, the stuff of human nature. The paleontological record confirms symbiosis, courtesies of every race. More and more data sheds remarkable testimony to our vegetarianism and lack of aggression as a species. Those naysayers who ridicule philosophies of non-violence and goodness are, themselves, meat eaters, hunters, obsessive buffs of blood splattered chronicles, and their opinions are enraged, if not entirely undermined by a bias of centuries. Yet, we must address their feeble attempts to exploit innocence because such voices have marred an otherwise pure past, and continue to rush humanity and all other species towards darkness.

Governance has little sway over the divides that conquer neighbors, betray quiet solace, or march unobstructed into the hells of historic hatred. To combat these spasms of bravado, collaborative efforts are indeed necessary. But to be successful they must adhere to the courage of nonviolence in an age of unprecedented destruction. It is not easy. No one argues that it is. But our capacity for love has been tested over millennia, and we have seen it rise to remarkable occasions and heights.

The Mount Everest of love will be our ability to cease killing, which is every child's understanding of

life. You do not take life, you cherish it. No other preamble was necessary after “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” That we have continued to ignore the Jewish summons suggests that we are a suicidal species, as socio-entomologist E.O. Wilson once described in a New York Times cover story. Paul Ehrlich furthers the logic by having reminded me, once, that we are likely to be the shortest lived species in biological annals. Others plead that the sooner we destroy ourselves the better.

But there is no comfort in these calmly-uttered mass graves because they necessarily involve the obliteration of all other species, who have every idea, but no defense against what we are doing. Dinosaurs looked up at the heavens with wondrous dread, I imagine, 65 million years ago. But we are no colliding asteroid or supernova, and to think in such cosmic terms does nothing for tonight’s hundreds of millions of hungry children, and the ten billion animals that will be slaughtered under Auschwitz-like conditions next year in the United States.

Our solutions must re-ignite that Biblical summons to put down our weapons, our hatred, our greed. To respect all life, and treat each other as we would wish to be mothered. Let governments take heed of their mothers; let children run for office and animal legislation confirm their independent standing in any court of law. When a donkey’s testimony resolved a dispute between two neighbors in a Dallas courtroom in April 2007 (“*Cantrell vs. Shamoun*”) there was again the proof of an ethological consciousness gaining ground on the monoliths of heavy human hegemony, usurping wrath with a child’s imaginative joy. We are able to be virtuous. We can formulate maxims from fairy tales with all the megatonnage of our conscience, and demonstrate choices that do not condemn but, rather, liberate us.



Photo/A.F.P. John McDougall

*17th Century Wang Due Phodrang*

Animal liberation is a prelude to the visitation of love upon the remaining forests of the world; the salvation of wetlands and all of the nearly 400,000 known vascular plant species. The love of pollination, of birds and bats, bees and wasps; the respect of those tens-of-millions of insect species we have not yet discovered; the rescue of every puppy and kitten, lamb and pigeon, turkey and pig; cow and chicken, emu and horse, fish and lobster.

**Vegetarianism, inspired, accessible family planning, and animal liberation: these are the hallmarks of 21st century biodiversity conservation which is, in turn, the essence of good government, and progressive, sustainable, economics.**

In the Kingdom of Bhutan, the Fourth King invited consideration of a new economic index, Gross National Happiness, a measure of sustainability that incorporated human rights, other animal rights, and a policy of forest preservation that mandated no fewer than 60% of the country to be covered in primary forest habitat. In South India, the Todas of the Nilgiris are vegetarian and maintain the most biologically rich, and oldest protected area in all of the Indian subcontinent. The Todas worship their buffalo, just as the Bishnois of India’s Thar Desert in Rajasthan worship an ecological hero of the Indian Renaissance, Jamboje, whose environmental edicts have become the Bible for the more than one million vegetarian tribal

peoples of that region. Elsewhere, from Mindinao in the Philippines to Tanzania, tens-of-millions of people are becoming vegetarian and vegan, the barometer for non-violence most applicable to a world in which the vast majority of killing occurs over the otherwise casual human dinner tables. It need not be so. Pushkar, a town of 30,000 people in Rajasthan, 350

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kilometers southeast of the nation's capital, New Delhi, is a living tribute to vegetarian ethics. No killing is allowed. Police enforce a policy that forbids alcohol and any non-vegetarian food anywhere in the city. Over 1.5 million eco-tourists flock to Pushkar each year, many in order to be bathed in the spiritual and emotional cleansing of a non-violent city. It *is* possible. And the economic benefits are undeniable.

Vegetarianism, inspired, accessible family planning, and animal liberation: these are the hallmarks of 21st century biodiversity conservation which is, in turn, the essence of good government, and progressive, sustainable, economics. Without turning back the tide of human over-population with zero population growth or, at most, one loved child per family, preferably an adopted child, there can be no fine-tuning of an engine that is blowing up. Without a concerted effort to teach non-violence in our schools, and the love of life, there will be yet another generation of mobsters, ganging up on the innocent, reaping benefits that are actually another name for small holocausts on every street corner. We need courageous, gentle people, not bullfighters. We need to remember Saint Francis and Mahavira, Buddha and Christ as examples of what we can be, people who are alive, not mere faded memories of all that has since been broken; of mortals turned into myth.

Our mortality is the world's mortality; our joy, its joy, and our suffering, the end of nature. Knowing this interdependency to be excruciatingly real is what must first and foremost school our cultures, our dreams and aspirations. We are a people who live inside nature. Our economies, our fleeting empires.... these are all moments *within* nature. It is not the other way round. The depth of our empathy is the truest earth science and the one dependability in a sea of human turbulence. Such islands of faith are what give us our strength in the hard days ahead.

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*See "Regarding a Sustainable World," on page 18 of this issue, for more about Dr. Michael Tobias.*