

How we view nature:

A look into the human view of nature in the modern world

by Shevek Pring

Since before the dawn of agriculture, humans have both feared and revered nature as the primordial force beyond our control yet key to our survival. This awe and fear can be traced historically through the worship of nature deities in every mythology recorded. These varied deities personify both the 'mother earth' aspect and the cruel, destructive nature of our environment. Examples are widespread: Geb (Egyptian god of the earth), Anu (also known as Danu/Dana - the Celtic personification of the cycle of seasons), Artemis (Greek goddess of childbirth and hunting or lifecycles in modern speak), Tammuz (Babylonian god of both vegetation and harvest) and Yggdrasill (Norse tree of life). There are many, many more, and in every ancient culture.

So, having established that nature has been at the forefront of human consciousness for millennia, why do we now view it as alien to us? Collins dictionary defines nature as

'the world, the universe, known and unknown, the power underlying all phenomena in the material world'.

Clearly, then, nature by definition includes humanity. However, this does not match our societies world view over the past several centuries. The industrial revolution and the formation of western world powers created a cultural separation between humans and nature. We saw ourselves as observers of nature rather than an integral part of it. Sometime prior to 1854 our world view changed from that shown by the plethora of mythologies to a world view so alien to nature that people like Henry David Thoreau felt it necessary to utterly reject it. Thoreau wrote about his experiences of living in nature alone in a house of his own construction and his book 'Walden' stands as a testament to his experiences and beliefs.

A similar sentiment to Thoreau's is expressed in more modern times by for example Chris McCandless, who in 1992, set off into the wild on his own to rediscover nature. Tragically, McCandless died as a result of his journey into the wild, perhaps confirming to many people the 'otherness' of nature. However, in his attempt to get 'back to nature' he was following the very ideals that we once held in our mythologies and that Thoreau was trying to recapture in 1854.

There is a rebalancing taking place in our view of nature. The 20th century saw the development of youth organisations such as the Scout Movement and representative organisations such as the BMC. This growing interest in the outdoors shows a rekindling of our interest in our place within nature. However, this is largely based around one area; adventure and outdoor pursuits. It is only very recently, with the likes of Ray Mears and forest schools, that our place within nature has become a more prevalent issue in the adventure industry and the wider populace.

Let us take a moment, then, to consider just what an impact we have made as a species. We are currently living in a new geological age; the age of Anthropoc, or the 'age of humans':

"The first challenge that I'll talk about is the challenge of what Paul Krutson has magnificently called the anthropoc - the idea that for the first time in history the physical systems of the planet, the chemical fluxes, the climate itself, the habitat, the biodiversity, evolutionary processes, are to an incredible and unrecognised extent under human forcings that now dominate a large measure of the most central, ecological, chemical and bio-physical processes on the planet - the hydrological cycle, the carbon cycle, the nitrogen cycle, the location of species and the extinction of species, basic physical habitats. We are in the anthropoc, and uniquely so. We are the first generation in the anthropoc, truly said. Of course human forcings have always played their role. We know that the hominids already controlled fire a million or more years ago, and therefore changed landscapes, even before the rise of homo sapiens, but never has the control of such fundamental processes been determined by human forcings, and we've barely awakened to that reality."

Sachs, Prof. Jeffrey; April 11, 2007 at 1:51 am: BBC, Britain, Climate change, Economics, Radio 4, Royal Society Reith Lectures

>>>>





<<<<

What, then, is the step required to generate the awareness needed in Social, Economic and Business areas, where the impact of our effects on the environment are greatest, and will have the greatest consequences? The answer to this is that we have already begun to take these steps.

The second world war with the implementation of rationing brought us closer as a nation to the pre industrial era than had been the case since the industrial revolution. Whilst the period following the war saw a resurgence of consumer culture there were indications that the movement had reached a point where its presence was being felt by a wider populace. Self sufficiency became a mainstream concept, series such as 'The Good Life', whilst

essentially parody, also acknowledged it as a concept that was widely known.

This beginning led to the concept of environmental change being more readily accepted. It also helped to show the impact on the economy of our environmental decisions. We have seen the rise of the environmental issue throughout the media in modern times, a testament to the growing knowledge of the general public. It has also become a political issue that is neglected at the political parties peril. Recently the trend has stepped up a notch with such iconic figures as Sir David Attenborough publicly stating the effects of global warming. Recent developments also within education suggest that the environmental impact of humans is being considered; the Learning for Life initiative includes funding for forest school units within its curriculum framework, and aspects of the P.E. curriculum are also



moving towards the outdoor education of our children within an ecological setting. We are clearly moving towards a brighter future; the question now is are we going to make it? With nature such a powerful and necessary force within our human sphere of existence, why are we battling so hard to deny our place within it and shut ourselves off from the very forces we rely on for life itself?

Woodland Life, a company running outdoor learning courses in the Dartmoor area is currently setting up a think tank for these very questions; what can outdoor learning in all its myriad facets do to help raise awareness and conserve the natural environment we depend upon? Are we already doing this, and if so, are we doing enough? We are looking to find a central thread throughout outdoor learning that focuses on our natural environment and its conservation, or to suggest one should be present if it is not already present in the industry. More than any other industry, we have the ability through our links to education to promote and progress understanding of the natural world and our interaction with it.

If you have any thoughts on these topics or are interested in participating in the debate please email:

info@woodlandlife.co.uk ■