

We Need to be Better Citizens of the Earth

If you are a human being and you live on the earth, then you are a citizen of the earth. You may also be a citizen of a country or city or family or whatever else. But as a citizen of the earth you are using the resources of the earth for heat, light, food, water, oxygen, medicine, transportation and protection from the elements. In addition, you are using the resources of the earth to dispose of and manage all the liquid, solid and gaseous waste that you produce.

And there are almost 8 billion other citizens on the earth needing to use the same resources that you are.

Some of us consume many more resources than others, either because of affluence or lack thereof, or because of a particular lifestyle. We sometimes use the term “footprint” to indicate the amount of resources an individual or a group of individuals utilize to maintain their particular lifestyle.

The first citizens of the earth in Texas were, of course, the Native Americans, and they had a very much smaller footprint on the land than modern Texans do. But even the Native Americans caused changes to the native habitat, and every generation of Texans since then have had an increasingly large footprint, so that each of us here today require very much more of the earth’s resources than the Native Americans did. And of course, there are orders of magnitude more of us today than there were before Europeans arrived.

That might not be a problem if the earth’s resources were increasing as fast as the use of them is increasing due to both increasing populations but also because of more per capita demand for resources. But the resources of the earth are the same today as they were 2000 year ago—actually probably less now because of all the resources modern mankind has depleted or destroyed.

Think of it this way: The earth is a space ship and you and a few fellow astronauts are traveling to a distant planet. The length of the journey and the number of travelers was planned in advance as were the food stores for the entire trip. But if one of you started sneaking extra food, thus using more of the spaceship’s resources than his/her share, the entire crew will suffer.

One can easily make the case that mankind has been sneaking extra food (resources) for many years, and continues to do so, thus depleting the resources for the future. The saying, “When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging” seems to apply here. How do we “stop digging?” By consuming less of everything, especially those things that require the most resources to produce. And, as a consequence, we can produce less waste of all types.

The one resource that modern man has available to him that previous civilizations did not is fossil fuels—coal, oil and natural gas. Even though there is a vast amount of it, it took millions of years to form and it is not being replaced on any timescale that is useful

to humanity. There is no question that these fuels have made our lives much easier and changed the very nature of society completely for most of us, in terms of both the energy we can get and the materials we can make from fossil fuels.

But we have consumed so much of these materials and are still doing so at such a rate that we are beginning to make the earth a less comfortable and less habitable place because of all the side-effects of consuming fossil fuels.

There are solutions for the effects of using these materials that can slow, and maybe eventually stop these detrimental side-effects. But it will take the cooperation of all of us and will in fact require some changes in the way most of us do certain things.

Without trying to enumerate a long list of specific actions, it will come down to: first, stop the most detrimental things we are doing ("stop digging") and learn to consume less and waste less. There is an argument that is sometimes made that consuming less and living a simpler life gives us more time to enjoy the natural world around us

We all need to learn to reduce the size of our footprint and become better citizens of the earth.

Until next time...

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