

## Don't Know Much About History . . . Don't Know Much About Biology

By Herman F. Greene

In 1973, Thomas Berry wrote his first essay on ecological concerns (after writing for many years on cultural history and Eastern religions). His essay was called "The New Story: Comments on the Origin, Identification and Transmission of Values." He wrote, "It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in-between stories."

This edition of *The Ecozoic Reader* asks: If we are moving into an ecological age, "How did we get here?" This follows the question of the previous edition, "Where are we?" and leads into the questions of the next two editions "Where are we going?" and "How do we get there?"

To answer how we got here, is a question of history and history is all about story.

### One Must Claim His or Her Place in History

One must claim his or her place in history. For me this means claiming that Earth is in an ecological crisis and that this is the most important issue facing humans. It also means the ecological crisis provides a basis for a seismic shift in human civilization, culture and consciousness.

There is no proof of this. When I write or speak, I recount how

[p]eople who are held in high esteem in the scientific community believe that the activity of humans is now resulting in the sixth great mass extinction in this history of the planet earth.<sup>1</sup> The last occurred at the end of the Mesozoic Era, with the death of the dinosaurs and other species, 65,000,000 years ago. Biologists tell us that the natural rate of extinction is one every four years,<sup>2</sup> and that the current rate of extinction is 27,000 species each year, three each hour.<sup>3</sup> Given the continuation of present trends, within this 21st century perhaps half of the species on Earth will vanish.<sup>4</sup> The current causes of these extinctions—habitat loss or fragmentation, invasive species, toxic waste, resource depletion, human population growth and over consumption, interruption of natural systems, and climate change—may potentially have a longer lasting and more severe effect on the functioning of Earth's systems than the catastrophic natural events that resulted in the mass extinction at the end of the Mesozoic Era.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, Bjorn Lomborg in *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2001, purports to debunk this extinction myth and concludes that in this century not half of the species will become extinct, but no more than 1.4%. This he agrees is not trivial, "It is a rate 1,500 times higher than the natural background extinction," yet, it is "not a catastrophe but a problem."<sup>6</sup>

The prestigious *Economist* magazine has welcomed Lomborg's approach:

*The Skeptical Environmentalist* delivers a salutary warning to conventional thinking. Dr Lomborg reminds militant greens, and the media that hang on their every exaggerated word about environmental calamity, that environmental policy should be judged against the same criteria as other kinds of policy. Is there a problem? How bad is it? What will it cost to fix? Is that the best way to spend those resources?<sup>7</sup>

Who are we to believe?

In the past issue of this *Reader* we presented our view of where we are. As Ellen LaConte put it:

We are in the Age of Critical Mass, at a point at which, though it has been coming on for a while, everything may change as if all at once, and nothing will be again as it was. . . . The reality is, we are face to face with the limit to the *whole Earth's carrying capacity*, but most of us, especially in the West, are disinclined to accept that final, potentially fatal reality, and even less inclined to do anything about it until forced to do so.<sup>8</sup>

It is from this vantage point that in this edition of the *Reader* we ask, "How did we get here?"

### History Is a Story About the Past to Make Sense of the Present

One way of looking at history is that it is a story about the past to make sense of the present. This can be illustrated if we think of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Until this unexpected event happened, post-World War II history was written to account for the Cold War, a bipolar struggle between the first world of capitalism led by the United States and the second world of Communism led by the Soviet Union. Yet, an account of this type was out of date in 1992. History had to be re-written to make sense of the new unipolar world.

It seems likely, however, that someone writing history in 1988 foresaw the imminent collapse of the Soviet

Union. Such person, we would say, was “ahead of his or her time.” We feel like we, meaning those of us who foresee the coming collapse of industrial civilization as a result of the current ecological crisis and write history from that perspective, are also ahead of our time. We see things that others do not see. We are claiming a certain perspective to understand what is going on. Necessarily when we write our story of “How did we get here?” we tell a different story than those who do not claim this perspective.

The writing of history assumes there is a causal relation between events of the past and events of the present and the future. This causal relation does not necessarily mean that past events predetermine present and future events. Rather, the causal relation may be that events of the past establish conditions where some outcomes in the present and future are more likely than others. If we begin with an ecological crisis perspective, certain events of the past will have greater significance to us than to those who do not share this perspective, and the meaning of those events will also differ.

Eventually history will show we were right, or that we were wrong.

### **What We Think We Know About the Future Is Our Understanding of the Past**

As for the future, we cannot know the future. What we think we know about the future is really our understanding of the past projected into the future. We are all familiar with sales charts where increases in sales over past years steadily rise into the future. The part of the curve beyond the present, is not the future, rather it is a statement of what the future will be like if it is like the past. In other words, it is a projection of the past into the future, and the future seldom conforms to the projection.

This is easy for us to accept when we think of sales projections. It is not so easy to accept that all of our understandings of the future are like that. They are an understanding of what the future will be like based on our understanding of what has happened in the past. Our “understandings” of the future are, at least in significant part, our projections of the past into the future.

### **History Makes Sense of the Present and, in So Doing, Shapes the Future**

That conception of the past is shaped by our perception of the present, and that our understanding of the future is our projection of this changeable conception of the past into the future, doesn't make history unimportant. Indeed it is this very process of examining the present, drawing on the past to understand the present, and projecting our understanding of the past into the future that drives human action.

For example, the United States is now engaged in a war in Iraq. Some look at past colonial enterprises in Iraq and say that the United States will be no more successful in Iraq than past colonialists. They project the colonial experience of, for example the British, on the current war:

They came as liberators but were met by fierce resistance outside Baghdad. Humiliating treatment of prisoners and heavy-handed action in Najaf and Fallujah further alienated the local population. A planned handover of power proved unworkable. Britain's 1917 occupation of Iraq holds uncanny parallels with today—and if we want to know what will happen there next, we need only turn to our history books . . . .<sup>9</sup>

Acting on such an understanding of the past, these people would see the current U.S. war in Iraq as doomed to failure and urge speedy withdrawal.

Needless to say, the members of the Bush administration who urge continuance of the war hold to a different story of the past, one without such parallels to past colonial failure. This 2003 article from *The Washington Post* shows how the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (on which the initial justification of the war was based) caused the Bush administration to re-tell its story of the past and project its new understanding of the past into the future:

As the search for illegal weapons in Iraq continues without success, the Bush administration has moved to emphasize a different rationale for the war against Saddam Hussein: using Iraq as the “linchpin” to transform the Middle East and thereby reduce the terrorist threat to the United States.

President Bush, who has mostly stopped talking about Iraq's weapons, said at a news conference Wednesday that “the rise of a free and peaceful Iraq is critical to the stability of the Middle East, and a stable Middle East is critical to the security of the American people.”

. . . .

In an interview yesterday, a senior administration official expanded on that theme, saying the United States has embarked on a “generational commitment” to Iraq similar to its efforts to transform Germany in the decades after World War II.

The Bush aide, who spoke on condition of anonymity, outlined a long-term strategy in which the United States would spread its values

through Iraq and the Middle East much as it transformed Europe in the second half of the 20th century.<sup>10</sup>

The history the Bush administration claimed to explain the present in Iraq was that of the Marshall Plan in Europe following World War II. And it was this story that the administration officials projected into the future.

At the time of the writing of this article, the war in Iraq continues. Which “past” will prove to be a truer guide to the future—the past colonial failure of Britain in Iraq, or the triumphant post-World War II Marshall Plan?

So, look out for your story of the past. George Santayana warns, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” His warning seems to assume that remembering the past is optional. In fact, we all remember the past as we plan our future. Perhaps Santayana’s warning should have been, “Be careful of what past you apply in interpreting the present, for you will base your decisions regarding the future upon it.”

### Don’t Know Much About History . . . Don’t Know Much About Biology

Sam Cooke in his well-known song, “Don’t know much about history,” crooned he knew little of what he was learning in books, but he knew he loved his girlfriend, and if he knew she loved him too, “what a wonderful world this would be.” There is something to this beguilingly simple view of life. Its truth is that what matters in the end is the love we have for each other. This is what makes life wonderful.

Yet, as others have rightly noted, love is not such a simple thing. Persisting in ignorance is not love. Love is acting in the best interests of those we love to bring about the most desirable future for them we are able. If we are not informed about the world, about both its present and its past, we cannot act in such a loving way. Further persisting in isolation, as though the lover and his or her mate exist alone in the world, is not love. In an ecological age, love means universal compassion, compassion for all beings. Knowledge enriches love, breadth of compassion enriches love and it is this love that brings about a wonderful world.

As shown above, our actions for the future are based, at least in significant part, on our story of the past. Thus, our search for a better future involves a search for a better understanding of the past. And for this, we must know a lot about history and, in an ecological age, also of biology.

As Thomas Berry wrote, “It’s all a question of story.” And so we ask, “How did we get here?”

<sup>1</sup> The last great extinction occurred 65,000,000 years ago at the end of the Mesozoic Era. Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin, *The Sixth Extinction* (New York: Anchor Press, 1995), 233-254.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 241. John Harte in *The Green Fuse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 85, gives the background extinction rate as one each year.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 280. Wilson explains how he made this calculation in pages 274-80.

<sup>4</sup> Leakey and Lewin, 240-41; Harte, 85. *See also*, Wilson, 278, and Paul Harrison and Fred Pearce, *American Association for the Advancement of Science Atlas of Population and Environment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 162. This is greater in scale than the extinctions at the close of the Mesozoic Era where it is estimated that a quarter of the species disappeared, and the time period of little more than a century is much shorter than that of the last great mass extinction. Harte, 85 (stating that a quarter of the species became extinct at the end of the Mesozoic Era in a period of a few thousand years).

<sup>5</sup> For example, it is now thought that an important cause of the extinctions at the end of the Cenozoic Era was caused by a meteor impact. Leakey and Levin, 55. While such an impact vastly changed the atmosphere, these effects dissipated over time. The toxins that humans are introducing into the biosphere, however, may have an even longer-lasting effect.

<sup>6</sup> Bjorn Lomborg, *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 257 and 255.

<sup>7</sup> “The Litany and the Heretic” [on-line article] *Economist*, January 31, 2002, available at [http://www.economist.com/science/displayStory.cfm?Story\\_ID=965520](http://www.economist.com/science/displayStory.cfm?Story_ID=965520), accessed November 20, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Ellen Laconte, “Critical Mass,” *The Ecozoic Reader*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2004), 6 and 11.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Fiske, “Iraq 1917” [online article] *Independent*, 17 June 2004, available on Global Policy Forum website at <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/issues/iraq/history/2004/0617iraq1917.htm>; Internet; accessed November 27, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Dana Milbank and Mike Allen, “U.S. Shifts Rhetoric on Its Goals in Iraq,” *The Washington Post*, 1 August 2003, available at [www.truthout.org/docs\\_03/080203A.shtml](http://www.truthout.org/docs_03/080203A.shtml); Internet; accessed November 27, 2004.

